The Making of 'Modern' Assam, 1826-1935

Jayeeta Sharma

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the Doctor of Philosophy degree at the University of Cambridge

St Catharine's College
Cambridge 2002

Declaration

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration. It is 80,000 words in length and does not exceed the word limit.

Summary

The Making of 'Modern' Assam: 1826-1935

This dissertation explores the emergence of modern identities in the Northeastern Indian province of Assam through an examination of changing colonial and indigenous representations of its land and people. It considers the emergence of regional identity, the demarcation of 'tribal' and 'lower caste' groups and Assam's relationship with Indic 'high culture'. The dissertation examines these representations against the background of changing economic structures and the emergence of a new bureaucratic system and its clerical servants. It considers Assam's development as a primary producer of a globally traded commodity, tea, and the complex ways in which related social and cultural structures meshed with ideologies of race, language and progress. The study begins in 1826, when British conquest brought the former Ahom kingdom into the orbit of India and severed it from its Southeast Asian neighbours. It ends in 1935 when the main elements of 'Assamese identity' had already been put into place by its middle class elites and literati and Assam was already being powerfully affected by influences from the wider Indian nationalist struggle.

Chapter 1 examines Assam's shifting frontiers through administrative and demographic movement, in the light of its new utility as a primary commodity producing 'Edenic' periphery of the British Empire. Chapter 2 traces how this process interacted with changing characterisations of its inhabitants. It examines how the colonial requirement for a pliable labour force reshaped these, as did the interventions of an indigenous elite. Chapter 3 goes on to examine the symbolic and cultural dimensions of this transition to colonial modernity. It examines the role of precolonial aristocrats and gentry in this transition through their creation of a new print culture in the vernacular. Chapter 4 focuses upon the way in which this vernacular language came to be the most important component of an emergent Assamese identity, and the social inclusions and exclusions that this process entailed. Chapter 5 explores the alternative 'publics' developing in Assam. It considers their publicists' representation of changing notions of 'caste' and 'tribe' as they related to regional and all-India ideas of a gendered national space.

Contents

Preface

Over the four years of this Making, I have been encouraged, inspired and helped by innumerable friends, family and well-wishers – across the length and breadth of three continents. They have helped out with the material aspects of computers, books, red tape, meals and accommodation in addition to pep talks, copy-editing and very often a listening ear. Rather than try to perform the impossible task of singling out particular names, I want to express my thanks for all those networks of wonderful people across Assam, Shillong, Delhi, Calcutta, California, London and Cambridge with whom my life has intersected over the last few years. In addition, I need to convey, however inadequately, my appreciation of the understanding and affection that my two sets of parents and Tarun Bhartiya have provided. And lastly, the traditional but in this case, heartfelt, thank you to my supervisor, Chris Bayly, who knows as well as I do, how much this dissertation owes to his advice and support, both academic and personal.

List of Abbreviations

ABUSS	Assamiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Sabha
ASA	Assam State Archives
DHAS	Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies
DRO	District Record Office
Mss	Manuscript
NAI	National Archives of India
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
OIOC	Oriental and India Office Collection
PP	Parliamentary Papers
RILC	Report from Law Commissioners Relative to Slavery in the East Indies
RNP	Report on Native Papers (Bengal Presidency)

Note on Orthography and Word Use

The selection and imposition of names and ways of writing them, is an extremely fraught terrain, which has, in recent years, provoked much recrimination, as well as actual bloodshed in the region I have studied. In this dissertation I have mostly erred on the side of convention, for instance, in using the older transliteration of 's' rather than the recent use of 'x' in words such as Assamiya (which would then be Axomiya). Since translations and transliterations from the vernacular always leave ground for difference, I have deemed it best to use my own, and leave the reader to dispute that as s/he thinks fit. Specific vernacular terms are explained either where they first appear in the text or indicated as appearing in the glossary. I have followed the practice of many historians in avoiding the use of diacritics. English quotations from printed and manuscript sources are as far as possible, as in the original, since their inconsistencies and linguistic deficiencies often contain precious information. However, in footnotes, I have tried to use a single usage as in the current spelling of Guwahati. As far as the names for the region and its inhabitants are concerned, I have again adhered to the conventionally accepted ones of 'Assam' and 'Assamese'. For terms such as 'tribal' or 'civilise' whose conventional rendering I find problematic, I have in the first instance, used them within quotation marks, but have subsequently dropped them for a more reader-friendly text.

Introduction

"The Making of 'Modern' Assam" explores the emergence of modern identities in Assam through an examination of the changing representations of its land and people, over the colonial period. It considers these representations against shifts in the colonial polity and economy and the emergence of a new bureaucratic system and its clerical servants. The starting point for the dissertation is the development of Assam as a primary producer of a globally traded commodity, tea. It goes on to examine the complex ways in which the social and cultural structures relating to that extractive economy meshed with colonial and indigenous ideologies of race, language and progress.

The main thrust of the study is to explore the shaping of a 'region' – 'Assam' in its new role as a South Asian 'frontier' of the British empire. It surveys the cultural discourses generated by indigenous and colonial elites against a political economy, which juxtaposed the agro-business of the plantation with a system of peasant subsistence agriculture. Therefore, the dissertation draws attention to a wider set of issues illuminating the interactions of 'empire' and 'colony', 'region' and 'nation', of 'tribal' and 'lower caste' groups against a dominant 'high caste' intelligentsia, and a borderland's relationship with Indic 'high culture'. By adopting a local perspective on the workings of imperial science, religion and commerce, the dissertation throws light on how the metropolitan imagination was able to incorporate regions such as Assam, Demerara, Darjeeling and others into its exhibitions, larders and marts - reducing them to signifiers of the globally traded commodities they produced.

The other prominent feature of this period – when the 'capitalist world system' was taking shape – was the increasing prominence achieved by 'nation' and 'nationalism'. Scholarship has found it difficult to come to an agreement on the outlines of 'nation', and this virtually mirrors its hotly contested situation in the 'real' world.[1] At the same

[1] The literature on nationalism is large and varied, some seminal texts being Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Inquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism*, Boulder, 1977; Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism*, New York, 1983; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and*

time, the aspiration towards 'nation' in people's lives remains acute - with most challenges to it unable to transcend the category while aiming to create their own counter-agendas. Since the discipline of history itself arrived through particular spatial frameworks based on modern state boundaries, the historian too is deeply implicated with this category of identity. It is part of the mythology of the modern nation that it seeks to impose a limit on understandings of the past, by willfully denying or appropriating that which predates or challenges it.

While the dissertation recognises the ubiquity that 'nation' and 'nationalism' have obtained in people's consciousness, it contests the assumption that the institution of the 'nation-state' has acquired a monopoly of the affiliations and identities that citizens find relevant in their journey through 'modernity'. It considers these issues in the context of some recent works that have emphasised the connections between modern conceptions of identity and older forms of belonging. The overwhelming epistemological authority that modernity has constructed for the nation-state can be placed in perspective by examining the social and territorial bonds of belonging that run anterior to it. For instance, C.A. Bayly has suggested the use of the categories 'patria' and 'old patriotism' to delineate those ties that regions and homelands had developed with their inhabitants, much before the nation appeared on the horizon.[2] Later nationalisms appropriated and redeployed those 'patterns of social relations, sentiments, doctrines and embodied memories', but never quite succeeded in domesticating them. Such a perspective allows an interpretation of earlier patriotisms and political debate as active forces in the construction of later identities – of region and nation – rather than as simply symbols to be reinvented at will by late-nineteenth century nationalists.[3] As Thongchai Winichakul points out, since nationhood was by no means the first or the only kind of imagined community, a nation has to be viewed

---

Nationalism, Oxford, 1983; Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, London, 1986; Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge, 1990; Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Delhi, 1994 and Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, Chicago, 1995.

[2] C.A. Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia*, Delhi, 1998, pp.1-7.

[3] Ibid, p.2.

in terms of its formulation amidst confrontations and appropriations of an existing 'imagined' community, or communities.[4]

It is against this background that the dissertation seeks to offer a fresh perspective by recovering 'region' and 'locality' from the 'enormous condescension' of the nation. South Asian historiography has been peculiarly susceptible to this situation, with its legacy of 'imperialist' scholars succeeded by out-and-out nationalists whose attention rarely managed to wander beyond the all-India workings of the Indian National Congress. While a new school of writing in the 1960s did pioneer a focus upon 'region', the overwhelming tendency was to regard it as a distinctive location for Namierite 'high politics'. However, over the next decades, the prominence achieved by social and cultural historians, in the academy at large, have played a role in bringing to the fore a growing body of scholarship which has critically engaged with 'region' and 'nation' through a wide-ranging view of the 'problem of change in society, economy and politics'.[5]

Academic Context to the Dissertation

The dissertation begins in 1826, when colonial conquest brought the former Ahom kingdom of Assam into the orbit of the 'Second British empire', severing it politically and culturally from its southeast Asian neighbours. It ends in 1935 when the main elements of 'Assamese identity' had already been put into place by its middle class elites and the region was being powerfully affected by influences from the wider Indian nationalist struggle. The Assam that it surveys thus requires to be located in terms of those shifting geographical, political and social dimensions, which underwent considerable realignment through the long century under review. While no one chapter covers the full chronological range of the study, each takes a long view of the processes it examines, and together, they seek to provide a wide-ranging perspective on the making of 'modern' Assam. The dissertation regards these

---

[4] Thongchai Winichakul, "Maps and the Formation of the Geo-Body of Siam," in Stein Tonnesson and Hans Antlov ed., *Asian Forms of the Nation*, Richmond, 1996, p.69.
[5] Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*, London, 1997. This work also offers an excellent bibliography covering all these phases of South Asian historiography.

different dimensions as interwoven strands of the 'dialogue in history' it seeks to recreate, through an exploration of intermeshing texts, individuals and institutions.[6]

The dissertation examines the nineteenth-century British-ruled province of 'Assam', which included the lands on either side of the Brahmaputra river, in addition to an expanding range of territories in the neighbouring hills – a landscape which proved to be in flux in accordance with the shifting imperatives of colonial policy. Most studies of this region have deemed it necessary to distinguish between the plains of Assam, for them historically and culturally a part of the Indian subcontinent from the ancient period onwards, in contrast to its peripheral hill territories.[7] One seminal work declares that 'the northeast region of India was never entirely cut off from the currents of historical change that shaped the sub-continent' though it was 'even enriched on occasion by direct or vicarious culture contacts with Chinese civilisation'.[8] Such assertions seem to stem from a desire to justify the integrity of the Indian Union, whether as in the first case, through integrating the Assam valley within a trans-Indic civilisational paradigm, or as in the second, associating its neighbouring hilly tracts with this process while retaining a caveat as to the possibility of other influences. Rather than struggle with the ubiquity of nation boundaries as frameworks for historical change, it seems more fitting to transcend the restrictions imposed by such a 'presentist' agenda and accept the possibility that regions such as Assam should be added to the ranks of historic borderlands, places defined by the flow of people, labour, capital, information, and cultural products across borders, physical and otherwise.

Colonial India, it has been pointed out, is a good example of an arena where a political boundary could be imposed before any corresponding social and ideological identities had been crystallised.[9] In the case of the British province of Assam, such boundaries were recent epistemological entrants into a region located at a 'crossroads' of South and Southeast Asian zones of ecology and migration. As Peter Robb has

---

[6] See Eugene Irschick, *Dialogue in History: Constructing South India*, Berkeley, 1994.
[7] Udayan Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*, Shimla, 2000.
[8] Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, Calcutta, 1985, p.1.
[9] Peter Robb, in "The Colonial State and Constructions of Indian Identity: An example on the Northeast Frontier in the 1880s," Modern Asian Studies, 31, (2), 1997, p.251.

pointed out, 'states have to be viewed as instruments for the construction of identity through their creation of structures (the geographical and institutional frame of boundaries, international recognition, state institutions and so on), and the role they play in the evolution of new *processes* – relations and idioms, national consciousness, a sense of community, changing values, and different bases for social discipline and cohesion'.[10] Such a historicised perspective makes it incumbent upon the historian of the borderland to transcend the limits of state-imposed boundaries, as well as of those of area studies. Following the example set by a recent study of another frontier territory, the dissertation is cognisant of the fact that these were 'spatially extended regions with their own cultural processes and imperatives which tend[ed] towards the syncretic and dialectic'.[11] It takes heed of the reminder that 'more often than not, the societies of the frontier seem to fall through the cracks between the imagined history of nation-states, ending up in obscure monographs of 'special-interest' ethnography.'[12]

With this in view, the dissertation explores the ramifications of Assam's transition - from an ecologically diverse region with its inhabitants at different stages of technology and culture, ruled by a succession of chiefly lineages, into its transformation into a province of empire. In its latter form, Assam was characterised as much by its potential for extractive natural resources as by its attributes as an 'ethnographic museum' and as a newly discovered Northeast Frontier of British India. The dissertation follows other recent works in aiming to reinstate the micro-study of the 'region' as a pivotal part of South Asia nation-based studies, as well as of the 'new imperial history', by recovering the linkages, 'real' and 'imagined', between different regions and populations.

Background: The Land and People

On 9 February, 1874, after a half-century of incorporation into the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency, a new Chief Commissioner's province of Assam was

---

[10] Ibid.
[11] Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the North West Frontier,* Oxford, 2000, p.25.
[12] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "The Frontiers of Japanese Identity," in Tonnesson and Antlov ed., *Asian Forms of the Nation*, p.65.

created – with the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, the Naga hills, the Khasi and Jaintia hills, the Garo hills, Goalpara, Cachar and Sylhet. Its total area was now some 54000 square miles, with a population of about 4150,000 and with a gross revenue amounting to about 52.5 lakhs of rupees. The innovation had been the decision to join the last three districts to the historic homeland of Assam, comprising the Brahmaputra valley, an area of 22,000 square miles, and its neighbouring hill tracts. The basis of this administrative restructuring was practical in nature – to circumvent the disadvantages of the scanty population and revenue of Assam proper. But this also involved a desire, on the part of policy-makers, to overcome the distance, both actual and metaphoric, with the outlying part of the Bengal Presidency that had been Assam, between 1826 and 1874. Despite a total river mileage of over 3000 miles for the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, the river's turbulence gave it a limited navigation potential, which was one reason for a relative paucity of long-distance links with the rest of the Indian subcontinent. 'At present the ordinary time taken by a country boat of 1000 *maunds*' burden from Calcutta to Dibrugarh [Upper Assam] is as great as that of a voyage round the Cape to London by a sailing vessel,' wrote Captain Vetch in 1853.[13]

In the eighteenth century, there had been some degree of Bengal trade with the Ahom territories, with salt as its major export, in return for imports of *muga* silk, mustard seeds, ivory, gold and slaves from Assam. But the limited extent of this external trade meant that the Ahom kings, Assam's precolonial rulers, could prohibit the admission of foreign traders into their territory, when they felt threatened by the politics upon their borders. Foreign traders with Assam were required to deal through the customs posts at the Bengal border. This was possible also given the nature of the local economy of Assam. What was more essential there were the exchange relationships conducted within the region. Cotton, forest products, oranges, rock salt and iron from the hills were bartered for rice, dried fish, silk and cotton cloth from the valley - at markets and fairs held periodically in the foothills.[14] Similar patterns of exchange prevailed through the caravan routes linking the hills with Manipur, Tibet and Yunnan.

---

[13] A.J. Moffat Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1854 (reprint Guwahati, 1982); Appendix C, Captain Vetch's letter of 22 June 1853, p.71.
[14] Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, p.23.

Given its inaccessibility from the Indian hinterland, it was not surprising that medieval Indic knowledge had laid emphasis on the region's alterity, viewing it as a site for supernatural wonders and esoteric Tantric rituals. Such attributes were connected to the prominence of mother goddess cults, particularly the Kamakhya shrine, in the western part of the Brahmaputra valley, known as 'Kamrup' in Puranic lore. But the Indo-Persian ecumene came into decisive contact with the valley only after it had acquired a new nomenclature, that of 'Assam'. This name appears to have emerged in association with the new ruling lineage of the Ahom, a people who claimed kinship with groups of Tai extraction in the Shan tracts of Upper Burma and the territories beyond.

The 'historical gossip' around the Ahom entry into Assam can be located in a larger history of agro-cultural complexes where movements of Burmese, Tai and Vietnamese people over a broad swathe of Asia displaced previous horticultural cultures by a practice of rice-based subsistence agriculture.[15] The contemporary evidence from Tai languages suggests that these groups began as irrigated wet rice specialists. That practice was to remain their common cultural denominator across the dispersed locations where they spread out, together with their systems of communal land rights.[16] The local legends of the thirteenth-century Ahom migration into Assam indicate that it involved a displacement of hoe-gardening and swidden-cultivating cultures from the lowlands into the hilly and forested peripheries of the Brahmaputra Valley. Rather than the physical dislodging of one population by another, this shift may be taken to represent the replacing of one agro-cultural complex by another. Within Assam, while some local groups displayed a considerable degree of adaptation to this new cultural complex, others preferred to move into ecological niches where wet rice farming was unsuitable.

In all likelihood, this initial phase of Ahom acculturation was confined to the territory of Upper Assam. Lower Assam, erstwhile Kamrup, which had closer geographical and ecological ties with North Bengal was subject to greater influence from

---

[15] See Richard A. O'Connor, "Agricultural Change and Ethnic Succession in Southeast Asian States: A Case for Regional Anthropology," in The Journal of Asian Studies, 54, (4), November 1995, pp.968-96.
[16] Ibid, p.974.

'Brahminised' groups such as the Baro-Bhuyans. The large numbers of copper plate land grants of the medieval period testify to the donation of land and cultivators to such groups who thereby expanded both settled agriculture as well as caste norms into the region. However, well into the modern period, swidden forms of agriculture continued to flourish. Therefore, Assam's ecology was one where both the nominally settled peasant and the shifting 'jhum' cultivator made extensive use of common arable, forest and water resources. Rather than a nucleated village pattern with specialised cultivating and artisanal groups, the Brahmaputra valley landscape was characterised by small hamlets clustered along the river banks, interspersed with urban settlements such as Gauhati, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Tezpur and Dibrugarh - the largest of which possessed only a few thousand inhabitants.

By the seventeenth century the Ahom had expanded from a petty chiefdom into an expansive state formation pressing hard upon the other local lineages of the Kachari, the Chutia and the Koch to attain hegemony over most of the Brahmaputra valley. While this early-modern period saw their appropriation of elements from a Brahminical repertoire of political legitimation, it is important to keep in mind that several ideologies could and did simultaneously sustain a single kingdom. For instance, the practice of royal burial continued alongside lavish spectacles of Sakta animal sacrifice and the extension of patronage towards Vaishnavite *satras* ('monasteries'). The institution of kingship acquired a sacred patina, with the ruler declared to be the all-powerful *Swargadeo* ('ruler of heaven'), the descendant of Indra, though in practice, the Patra-Mandali ('council of ministers') and the Brahmin, *Daivagna* and *Bor-Kalita* scribal castes dominating the service gentry played a considerable role.

A prominent function of the service castes was to maintain the *buranjis* or chronicles detailing the political trajectory of the Swargadeos, from the days of their eponymous founder Sukapha. Since early examples of this genre are virtually non-existent, it is difficult to speculate as to their character, but it is likely that they were in a Tai idiom and style, resembling the ruling lists which other Tai groups in Burma, Thailand, Laos and China were producing. By the eighteenth century, these works had shifted into the local idiom of Assamiya, and the Brahminised service gentry had taken over their production from the *Bailung*, the Tai religious specialists. As Sheldon Pollock has

theorised, this practice of 'vernacularisation' was a cultural mode being adopted by regimes all over Asia in the early-modern period.[17] In addition to these political chronicles, the region's vernacular culture also began to find expression through a devotional register, in the *carit-puthis* ('sacred hagiographies') produced by the satras.

The backbone of the Ahom state was the institutional structure that, by the seventeenth century, had coalesced around Assam's agricultural economy. The regime's innovations of *sali* ('wet rice') production, the use of iron implements and the construction of dykes were based upon a system of communally held lands and corvée labour obtained from the *paiks* ('peasantry') for civil and military purposes. The bulk of the cultivated land in the Brahmaputra valley was uniformly distributed among the non-servile adult male population, on the basis of periodic land surveys. Usufruct rights were granted for rice land and private proprietary rights for homestead and garden land. The use of Persian-derived terms such as paik, *khel* or *lakhiraj* in the administration, as well as the adoption of Mughal courtly fashions of dress and portraiture are evidence of the ready appropriation of trans-Indic norms by the Ahom regime. However, other traits such as the reiteration of a common kingly lineage with 'brother Shans', the comparative indifference towards obtaining high ritual status on the Rajput pattern and the visibility of the Kunwari ('aristocratic Ahom woman') in the public arena suggest that the regime continued to maintain its dialogue with the two cultural nodes on either side of its territories.

The Ahom regime maintained itself with remarkable resilience until the later part of the eighteenth century, despite aggrandisement by the Mughals, as well as periodic peasant and elite unrest within its territory. Through the entire period, its rule was sustained by a series of population movements - of service, artisanal and peasant groups, from the hinterlands to its east and west. But this feature came under major stress as a reinvigorated Konbaung regime ruling over the Burmese empire began to mobilise the Shan and Singpho groups on Assam's periphery. By the eighteenth century, these groups were aiding the Burmese forces to carry away large numbers of 'slaves' from the fertile plains of Assam. At one level, these attempts at extending the Burmese sway over Assam, Arakan and Manipur were a logical continuation of the

---

[17] Sheldon Pollock, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular", The Journal of Asian Studies, 57, (1), February 1988, pp.6-37.

Konbaung incorporation of the Upper Burma tracts. Neither the Ahom nor the other lesser regimes in the region could resist this onslaught, despite attempts at reordering their internal structures through features of a military fiscal system. Finally, it was the English East India Company, the new power in South Asia, which decisively moved to arrest the Burmese advance. The major consequence was the Company's initiation of a process, which began the incorporation of Assam into the economic, political and cultural practices of an Indic colonial modernity.

Historiographical Themes

The dissertation conceives of its principal aim as being to examine how at different times and places, a specific social reality was constructed, how people conceived of it and how they interpreted it to others. It sees cultural representations and economic struggles as going hand in hand for the historian, a way to understand the mechanisms by which social groups attempt to impose their conception of the social world, its values and its dominion.[18] By locating the reality of society in 'historically changing, imperfectly bounded, multiple and branching social alignments', the concept of a fixed, unitary and bounded culture gives way to a sense of the fluidity and permeability of cultural sets put into play by determinate human actors under determinate circumstances.[19] Such a study of collective representations can thus use culture as an entry point to draw attention to the social dislocations of capitalist development and the changing forms of State power through the interactions of locality and empire.[20]

At the same time, the historian has to bear in mind that locating domination in cultural, discursive terms at the site of institutional structures such as the colonial state runs the risk of assuming that such discourses have an a priori existence untouched by the interventions of those over whom they have jurisdiction. In this context, it is pertinent to bear in mind the fallout from the 'postmodernist turn' within the academy, in particular the polemics around the influential Subaltern Studies intervention. In contrast to the latter's first phase which bore the imprint of the 1960s and 1970s mood of 'history from below', the dominant thrust in recent years has been

---

[18] Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, Cambridge, 1988, pp.4-6.
[19] Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, Berkeley, 1982, pp.390-1.
[20] Eley, "Edward Thompson, Social History and Political Culture," p.16.

'a critique of Western-colonial power-knowledge with non-Western 'community consciousness' as its valorised alternative'.[21] While this intervention has certainly revitalised Third World histories, its tendency to read the indigenous necessarily as the authentic and to reify as distinct the spheres of domination and autonomy is troubling, accompanied as it is by a subordination of the material contexts of power to its discursive potential.

What this dissertation has tried to engage with is a more interactive terrain where the insights of discourse analysis are combined with those of social history, which conceive of productive relations as lived human experiences rather than abstract structures.[22] It has been inspired by recent readings which point out how colonialism was 'the site not only of contested understandings, but also of deliberate misrepresentations and manipulation, in which the seemingly omnipotent classifications of the Orientalist were vulnerable to purposeful misconstruction and appropriation to uses which he never intended, precisely because they had incorporated into them the readings and the political concerns of his native informants'.[23] Thus, the dissertation brings together texts elicited from colonial officials, missionaries, planters and indigenous publicists to create a history informed by such a notion of 'mutuality - not as common contribution, but as struggle and contestation'[24] in the imaginings of identity and self over this long century of Assam's emergence. While focusing upon the local, it tries not to lose sight of the intermeshed processes, which bound that arena together with other regions of the sub-continent and of empire.

An useful tool for an analysis of the dissertation's sources has been the concept of the public sphere, proposed by Jurgen Habermas as 'a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organises itself as the bearer of public

---

[21] Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, Delhi, 1997, p.82.
[22] Geoff Eley, "Edward Thompson, Social History and Political Culture: The Making of a Working-class Public, 1780-1850," in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland ed., *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, Philadelphia, 1990, pp.12-49.
[23] Rosalind O' Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia," in Vinayak Chaturvedi ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, London, 2000, p.103.
[24] Ibid.

opinion'.[25] Despite its inherent limitations and occlusions, this theory offers a useful framework for analysing the structures of modernity, with their potential for emancipatory forms of life as well as for social, economic and political exclusion - a discursive model against which actual political and personal relations can be measured. The dissertation has found it constructive to keep in mind the recent engagements with this theory which have modified it by postulating a notion of multiple, sometimes overlapping or contending public spheres and by emphasising the elements of contestation and unequal access that Habermas's attention to the bourgeois liberal variant had tended to gloss over.[26] It has been suggested that the public sphere be regarded as the structured setting where cultural or ideological contest or negotiation among a variety of publics takes place, within a single structured setting that advantages some and disadvantages others.[27]

However, given the predominantly European terrain that the Habermasian formulations cover, it is pertinent to refer to C.A. Bayly's discussion of the North Indian ecumene. He defines this as the predominant form of cultural and political debate that prevailed over the precolonial period. Bayly explores this ecumene as persisting, in conjunction with the press and new forms of publicity, well into the late-nineteenth century.[28] Such an emphasis on 'continuity' has the merit of emphasising the manner in which many publicists of the colonial period were drawing on techniques of communication, debate and persuasion which had indigenous as well as Occidental roots.[29] Another important insight, into these specifically South Asian processes, comes from Francesca Orsini's exploration of the Hindi public sphere of the early-twentieth century.[30] This work focuses upon the colonised, 'socially subordinate' vernacular elite which constituted the bulk of that public, the ambitions and frustrations of that class, its inclination to establish a dogmatic norm for linguistic

---

[25] Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, tr. T. Burger, Cambridge, Mass., 1992.
[26] See the essays in Craig Calhoun ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992 and Johanna Meehan ed., *Feminists Read Habermas*, London 1995.
[27] Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, p.306.
[28] C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge, 1996, p.182.
[29] Ibid, p.181.
[30] Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-40*, New Delhi, 2002, pp.11-14.

and cultural standards and to exclude certain social groups from equal participation within the homeland that it was positioning itself to represent.

In this manner, with a revamped notion of 'public sphere' as its dominant heuristic tool, the dissertation considers the processes of transforming authority relations, of social relations being channelled into new institutional arrangements and the conscious emergence of political impulses in an overall context of social communication in colonial South Asia. The new 'information order' was the arena in which a variety of publics and publicists acted out their changing meanings, where print technology was quickly appropriated and extended in a multitude of ways by different groups within indigenous society. Without going so far as to claim a revolution in mentalities, it is important to discern the far reaching repercussions produced upon existing knowledge formations by these modern forms of 'information diffusion and retrieval', as well as the interactions that emerged between them.[31]

An important remit of the dissertation is to explore print culture as an instrument to extend communicative networks, and its role in allowing for a considerable, if limited democratising impact in colonial South Asia. It examines the operations of print in the Assam context - from its first use in a *dubhashi*'s cultural repertoire, over the Orunodoi missionary periodical's attempts at standardising a precolonial court idiom, until its early-twentieth century deployment by publicists positioned at different ends of a wide social spectrum. The periodical genre of the newly standardised vernaculars was an important site where these practices came together – in the form of emblems of a distinctive colonial print culture. This process of 'vernacular modernity' was a distinguishing feature of the quest for identity embarked upon by nineteenth-century colonial intelligentsias all over Asia. The dissertation explores the didactic message conveyed by this culture - of learning, sacrifice and devotion to mother- tongue and land. It examines the contours of 'the press, education and schools, literary genres, associations and political activities...all spaces where language, ideas, literary tastes, and individual and group identities were reshaped, both consciously as well as by the dynamics and momentum of each medium'.[32]

---

[31] Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp.3-5 and p.9.
[32] Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere*, p.7.

It has been suggested that the social changes of the nineteenth century were transforming a status conscious society where social and economic relationships were, notionally at least, dependent on caste and custom, to a relatively open set of public arenas where class was taking the place of the latter.[33] While this picture is open to dispute on a number of points, the dissertation will examine how the contemporary publicist was largely inclined to conceive of his world in such a manner. It is in this context that it prefers to regard the colonial intelligentsia in Assam, like its bhadralok counterpart in Bengal, as a social class, rather than as a status group.[34] As we are reminded, vide Marx, a social class is not formed because a group of people hold a common position in a particular sector of the economy and enjoy a similar lifestyle - but because its members are conscious of their existence as a group and are organised in opposition to other groups.[35] At the same time, the dissertation draws inspiration from recent works which have directed our attention to the 'fragile, doubt ridden self-image' of the colonial intelligentsia, whose 'self-fashioning' necessarily entailed a series of exclusions on the basis of race, gender and class. Rather than an absolute rupture occasioned by colonial rule, it may be regarded as being imperative to consider the enduring power of 'precolonial forms of domination, however modified, [as] helping to mediate colonial authority in vital ways, even functioning autonomously at times'.[36]

In the dissertation, this process of creating a Self and Other/s is explored as an ensemble of social and political relations in Assam. It proceeds through the intelligentsia's journey from precolonial service gentry to a self-consciously modernistic middle-class - within a political economy of the region which was being gradually absorbed into the workings of a wider capitalist world system. The competition from the Bengali *amla* and the spectre of the plantation coolie provided the two nodes through which an Assamese *bhaal manuh* ('respectable man') attempted to fix his own boundaries and that of his *desh* ('land') and *jati* ('community'). The dissertation has attempted to bring together, in its analysis, the frequently distinct worlds of the discursive and the economic. One way of doing this

---

[33] S.N. Mukherjee, "Class, Caste and Politics in Calcutta, 1815-38," in Edmund Leach and S.N. Mukherjee ed., *Elites in South Asia*, Cambridge, 1970, p.35.
[34] Ibid, p.51.
[35] Ibid, p.52.
[36] Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, p.92.

is by examining the economy itself as a variety of discourse, through the representation of economic actors such as coolies. Through this, it is hoped to provide an insight into a central problems faced by the researcher of the present day, how to harvest the important tools provided by cultural studies without losing the rigour into the productive processes that the discipline of history provides.

Chapter Plan

Chapter 1 of the dissertation examines Assam's shifting frontiers through administrative and demographic movement, in the light of its new utility as a primary commodity producing 'Edenic' periphery of the British Empire. The first part traces the region's emergence as a tea economy and the interaction of indigenous and colonial elites with nineteenth century ideologies of progress. Rather than an essentialised view of an overarching colonial discourse, it stresses the diversities within both European and indigenous groups as well as the connections between theories of agrarian entrepreneurship and the racial and civilisational typologies articulated by missionaries, planters, administrators and local gentry. The second part of the chapter examines how these ideas about race, civilisation and progress came to be located against the physical and political restructuring of Assam. Through the period of its study, the Brahmaputra valley was juxtaposed in various modes against the sparsely populated tracts to its east, as was Assam with other parts of the Bengal Presidency. A rhetoric of 'difference' was articulated to demarcate the 'plains' and 'hills' of the region, partly building upon existing indigenous notions of territoriality, but extending and redeploying them on the basis of civilisational essence.

Chapter 2 extends such a discussion by exploring how the nineteenth-century characterisation of the region's inhabitants was shaped by the requirements of commodity production, the colonial desire for a pliant labour force, and the aspirations towards progress nurtured by indigenous elites. The signal innovation that tea production introduced was the system of the plantation. While the plantation has to be analysed as an outpost of a particular mode of production in the midst of other modes, it cannot be analysed in isolation from the workings of the particular region where it is established. Therefore, the dissertation considers the tea plantation as an 'enclave sector' operating within a range of economic and cultural processes within Assam, as well as a representative of the global capitalist order. The specifics of the

local situation are emphasised by exploring the interaction of tea with another agrarian commodity, opium, and the role played therein by the colonial machinery as well as the local population of Assam. Finally, the chapter draws attention to how the imperatives of plantation production reordered the natural environment and the demographic composition of the region.

Chapter 3 goes on to examine the symbolic and cultural dimensions of this transition to colonial modernity, locating it in the larger context of an evolving relationship between state, temple and service elites from the precolonial period. It traces the displacement of an older world of precedence and ritual by a colonial intelligentsia positioning itself within an associational culture and a vernacular public sphere. The involvement of these predominantly caste Hindu elites with the colonial city, its new educational institutions, print culture and consumption patterns served as the impetus for shaping a social identity which sought to balance the requirements of 'local particularity' with an increasing necessity for trans-Indic belonging. One way of achieving this was through the prominence given within the new print culture to a redeployed devotional idiom of Vaishnavism, where the transformation from a localised shrine system to a wider, abstract form of deification around a historicised founder, Sankardeb, could give Assam a distinct place within the landscape of Indic Bhakti. The chapter therefore traces how the precolonial notables' vocabulary of ritual honour and access to local patronage was gradually displaced by a more diverse 'cultural capital' of literature, language and religion that the intelligentsia could accumulate within the colonial apparatus. Through their hegemony over these new public arenas, it would aspire to a new status as progressive, middle class, Assamese and Indian.

Chapter 4 focuses upon the way in which a newly standardised vernacular language emerged as the most important component of such an Assamese identity, and the social inclusions and exclusions that this process engendered. It traces how the new regime of colonial modernity within which a service gentry was transforming itself into a modern intelligentsia served as the backdrop for a notion of mother-tongue/official language/nation uniformity. The politics of empowering language was couched within a vocabulary of historical and emotional entitlement in attempts to

persuade its subjects about the urgency of its cause. An inevitable concomitant of this process was the subordinated status for those inhabitants of the homeland who could not, or would not, subscribe to the new ideology of overlap between a now significant 'mother-tongue' and 'official language', the corollary of which was that the nation's territory should be culturally and linguistically homogenous. Mother- tongues other than the dominant Assamiya variant were being demoted into the terrain of dialect, by the vernacular publicists' discovery of Aryanism as a criteria for imposing hierarchy upon language and race. Gendered imaginings played a significant role within this equation, with the valorisation of language as mother accompanied by the segregation of language practice within norms of education and proficiency effectively dominated by young male publicists from a high caste Hindu background.

Chapter 5 examines the changing representations of 'caste' and 'tribe' within various 'public spheres', whose use of a common vernacular language could not obscure the conflict, contested meanings and exclusions inherent in their constitution and conduct. It explores their interaction with constructions of 'India' and 'nation', and how notions of caste and religious community in early twentieth-century South Asia were inextricably caught up with the emergence of gendered social identities. It goes on to trace how various social groups in Assam shared a rhetoric of self-improvement, 'progress' and 'national regeneration' in the post-World War I period, when a deeper penetration of educational institutions, print capitalism and the possibility, however scanty, of political representation enabled a certain broadening of the public voice. This period of late colonial rule was characterised by a fluctuating melange of social imaginings, as local groups responded to the changing political and economic meanings of their lived existence by recreating themselves as Kachari, Bodo, Kaivarta, Ahom, Assamese, Indian - identities which would oscillate, overlap as well as challenge each other. A phenomenon which did serve to knit these varied strands together was the hegemony achieved, so far, by one particular version of Assam's immediate past which valorised Ahom rule over Assam, and the chapter examines how the dominant Assamese public successfully deployed motifs of heroic history to further an ideal of a national space structured in terms of gender and race. Finally, it suggests that the multiple public arenas of this period managed to retain their predominant male bias, not just in terms of actual participation, but more significantly

in the long run, by conceptualising community status in terms of normative female behaviour.

I The Setting: Jungle, Garden and Frontier

Introduction

This chapter explores the emergence of Assam as the Northeastern frontier of British India and the ways in which its physical and social landscape were shaped by the interaction of colonial and indigenous elites with ideas of civilisation, race and improvement. It further traces how the workings of imperial institutions and ideologies in relation to the production and distribution of natural resources were transforming the relationship between people, land and frontiers upon this Indo-Sinic periphery.

Rather than what its Ahom rulers had called 'a land of golden gardens' ('mung-dung-sung-kham'), early-nineteenth-century-British observers saw Assam as a 'profitless...primeval jungle'.[1] Such a perception came partly from their ringside view of the region's political turmoil, with the internal opposition to the Ahom state from the Moamoria rebels,[2] worsened by the incursions disguised as assistance from its 'brother kings' of the aggressive Konbaung regime.[3] Concern at these Burmese actions, given Assam's strategic location on the Bengal border, was instrumental in the East India Company deploying its troops in 1824 - the beginning of the First Anglo-Burmese War.[4] Two years later, with the treaty of Yandaboo establishing a British victory, the king of Burma, Ba-gyi-daw, 'renounced all claims upon, and promised to abstain from all future interference with the principality of Assam and its

---

[1] John MacCosh, *Topography of Assam*, London, 1837, p.2.

[2] The Moamoria were followers of the Moamoria Gosain, a Vaishnavite sect of Upper Assam, a majority of whose members came from lower-caste and tribal groups. From 1769 until 1805, they mounted prolonged opposition to the Ahom state, even taking over its capital and establishing their own leader as king, for a brief while. Though the Ahom dynasty, with the help of Captain Welsh's troops and hired Hindustani mercenaries, managed to regain the throne, the Moamorias retained control over a Matak state at the extreme edge of the Brahmaputra valley, with their leader Sarbananda taking the title of Bar Senapati. This state in fact outlived the Ahom one, since it was annexed into British India only in 1839. See Amalendu Guha, "The Moamoria Revolution: Was it a Class War?" The Assam Tribune, 18 October 1950; *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, Calcutta, 1985, pp.98-138 and Maheswar Neog, *Socio-Political Events in Assam leading to the Militancy of the Mayamariya Vaishnavas*, Calcutta, 1982.

[3] Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, Cambridge, 2001, pp.17-20.

[4] See Ravi Ahuja, "'Captain Kittoe's Road': Early Colonialism and the Politics of Road Construction in Peripheral Orissa," Unpublished paper, August 2001, for a similar analysis of the annexation of the coastal plains of Orissa in 1803. Also C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and*

dependencies'.[5] Obtained apparently as a byproduct of an unplanned war, Assam's place in the evolving imperial system was yet to be decided, this would have to await the discovery of what the region's 'wilderness' could offer.

This dissertation seeks to follow the direction set by the 'new imperial history' in tracing connections between 'high' politics, intellectual currents and cultural patterns, the ways in which post-Enlightenment beliefs about man and nature were transposed onto the stage of empire, and how encounters between the Orient and the Occident were mediated through the interactions of the structures and ideologies of both. This is not to gainsay the power equation weighted in favour of the colonisers, the tremendous dislocation and upheaval caused by the quest for a new Eden and its imposition of a Planter's Raj upon a sparsely populated, subsistence peasant economy. As in other parts of the 'tropics', the nineteenth-century-opening up of frontier regions such as Assam was based on extensive movements of capital, goods and people. The dissertation examines the manner in which this new political economy interacted with the assimilation of this borderland as a cultural and political frontier for an Indic world, drawn away from its previous positioning at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia.

1 (1) Nature and the Imperial World

The East India Company's involvement with Assam was inaugurated at a pivotal point in its career, just as the shift from military fiscal adventurism to bureaucratic system was well on its way. Recent works have shown how the East India Company was one of the first limbs of the British empire to feel the wrath of the 'new currents of public morality' and the impact of the age of economical reform.[6] In 1784, the

---

Social Communication in India, 1780-1870, Cambridge, 1996, p.113 for a brief analysis of the backdrop to this first confrontation between the British and Burmese varieties of expansionism.

[5] In the English version of the Treaty of Yandaboo, signed on 24 February, 1826, Article 2 stipulated that the King of Burma, Ba-gyi-daw, 'renounced all claims upon, and promised to abstain from all future interference with the principality of Assam and its dependencies'. The Burmese version went as follows, 'The king of Burma shall no more have dominion over, or in the direction of, the towns and country of Assam, the country of Ak-ka-bat [Cachar] and the country of W-tha-li [Jaintea]'. Cited by A.C. Banerjee, "The New Regime: 1826-1931," in H.K. Barpujari ed., *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. 4, Guwahati, 1992, p.1.

[6] See Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain and the 'Improvement' of the World*, Yale, 2000, pp.121-4 and Robert Travers, "Contested Notions of Sovereignty in Bengal under British Rule," Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Cambridge, 2000, Introduction.

notoriety earned by the Company's financial imprudence and corruption drove Pitt's government to bring it under the Crown through the Board of Control which would 'superintend, direct and control' the 'civil or military government or revenue of the British territorial possessions in the East Indies'.[7] This measure meant a key cultural reorientation in the political apparatus of both metropole and periphery. Now, imperial power could be discerned to be emerging through, and justifying itself to public and Parliament by its furtherance of science, knowledge and morality in far-flung corners of the earth. Richard Drayton has vividly depicted how the development of agrarian science was drawing the metropole and the peripheries into closer proximity, partly through the agency of

> The new breed of colonial governors, administrators and judges, men who transmitted a range of intellectual interests from Britain to India. Appointed as much for the benefit of the home public as for their colonial subjects, they brought contemporary British policies with them to the colonies, combining older Whig notions of the basis of politics in land, with a wider Physiocratic faith that public patronage of agriculture might lead to a new 'natural' balance.[8]

Such a new style was first displayed in 1799, when the conquest of Mysore was followed by Wellesley's commission for its surveys by Colin Mackenzie and by Francis Buchanan, a policy which accumulated a store of 'useful knowledge' as well as a new, positive image for the Company as patron.[9] Attributing high-sounding, if not entirely disinterested motivation to military adventurism was not, of course, entirely a new ploy, witness for example, the 1792 instance of Lord Cornwallis's justifications for the Company's first expedition into the Ahom kingdom. This, he declared, had been sent partly from 'motives of humanity' to aid Assam's distressed ruler and partly to take advantage of 'so favourable an opportunity to obtain good surveys'.[10] As it happened, Captain Welsh's expedition did not penetrate deeply enough to 'acquire every information, both of the population, and of the manners and

---

[7] B.B. Misra, *The Unification and the Division of India*, New Delhi, 1990, p.6.
[8] Drayton, *Nature's Government*, p.115.
[9] Wellesley's instructions, easily as wide ranging in their scope as those of the gazetteers of a century later, can be found in Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *A Journey from Madras through Mysore*, 3 volumes, London, 1807, Vol. 1, viii-xiii. Buchanan's evidence about the agricultural economy, which stressed how Tipu Sultan had impoverished the country, provided a powerful argument to justify Company expansion into that territory. See Marika Vicziany, "Imperialism, Botany, and Statistics in Early Nineteenth Century India: The Surveys of Francis Buchanan (1762-1829)," Modern Asian Studies, 20, (4), 1986, pp.625-60.
[10] Bengal Political Consultations, No. 17, 3 October, 1792, NAI.

customs of the inhabitants as well as the trade and manufactures, and natural productions',[11] but the Governor's declaration was a prescient sign of the direction in which British attention was to move. For the moment, the Company was satisfied with the monopoly of the salt trade from the Assam king, but its 'natural productions' were the hope for the future. The erstwhile traders would aspire to establish themselves as gentlemanly rulers, and improving landlords for Nature's estate in the East.

'Plant colonialism' was a significant part of these endeavours, evident in the series of systematic surveys of the East India Company's territories, where the collection of plant and herbal knowledge took a prominent role.[12] Such activities were dictated as much by a new 'improving' agenda as by their avowed scientific and material purpose.[13] Nature's bounty was to be discovered, and thereafter, improved upon, by its dissemination through empire. Thus, the founding meeting of the Horticultural Society at Calcutta triumphantly declared that 'indigenous fruits and vegetables might be most essentially improved by scientific cultivation, and the rich soil and invariable summer of these regions, must be favourable to exotic introductions, under judicious management and sedulous attention.'[14] By the beginning of the nineteenth century, botanic gardens and surveys were a normal part of the consolidation of new conquests, inaugurating 'a complicated theatre of virtue' through which 'the Crown, the East India Company, and perhaps the British nation, sought equally to offer living testimony of their improving administration'.[15]

In this spirit, Robert Kyd's scheme for a 'Garden of Acclimatisation' near Calcutta in 1776 included proposals for introducing 'the cultivation of cotton, tobacco, cotton, tea etc' – the successful propagation of which would enable the British to 'outstrip our

---

[11] Ibid.
[12] See B.B Misra, *The Unification,* pp.53-5, for brief details of surveys by Mackenzie, Buchanan, Colebrooke, Hodgson, Herbert, Webb, Monier-Williams etc.
[13] See John M. MacKenzie ed., *Imperialism and the Natural World*, Manchester, 1990.
[14] "Institution of a Horticultural Society," The Calcutta Monthly Journal, 24 June 1816, reprinted in Benoy Ghose ed., *Selections from English Periodicals of 19th Century Bengal*, Vol. 1, Calcutta, 1978, p.3.
[15] Drayton, *Nature's Government*, pp.121-4. Also see Satpal Sangwan, "From Gentlemen Amateurs to Professionals: Reassessing the Natural Science Tradition in Colonial India 1780-1840," in Richard H. Grove, Vinita Damodaran and Satpal Sangwan ed., *Nature and the Orient*, Delhi, 1998, pp.210-36.

rivals in every valuable production'.[16] However, while the Company did announce to him that 'so sensible are we of the vast importance of the objects in view that it is by no means our intention to restrict you, in point of expense', it does not do to overestimate its conversion to the cause of disinterested science and knowledge. When these causes did not appear likely to provide immediate returns, the East India Company's functionaries made no bones about withdrawing their patronage. David Arnold has shown how science did impinge directly upon the Company's active attention from time to time, when its economic and political interests were aroused and the case for some scientific endeavour was convincingly made, but mostly, it retained its secondary importance compared with the more pressing concerns of revenue, diplomacy, law and order.[17]

The case of tea offers a noteworthy illustration of how changing economic and political imperatives shaped the Company's zeal for the pursuit of such knowledge. Robert Kyd had experimented with China tea at Calcutta in the 1780s, in the spirit of Joseph Banks' dictum that since the plant grew best between 26th and 30th degree latitudes, Eastern India might be a suitable habitat. Banks had further advocated the offer of 'liberal terms' by the Calcutta botanical garden to attract tea growers with their shrubs from Canton and Hunan.[18] Despite this encouragement from the Father of imperial botany, the Company appeared fairly indifferent to these efforts, threatening as they did its profitable tea monopoly with China. It was another cash crop, cotton, which received much more official attention in these years.[19] The Company's apathy is more understandable when we consider that the attempts at growing smuggled plants in territories ranging from Java to Ceylon, had produced very poor results, leading to speculation that perhaps the Celestial Empire was tea's only true home. In the 1820s, Nathaniel Wallich, the new Superintendent of the Calcutta garden, did

---

[16] Kalipada Biswas, *The Original Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks Relating to the Foundation of the Royal Botanic Gardens*, Calcutta, 1950, pp.185-236.
[17] David Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India,* Cambridge, 2000, p.25.
[18] Memorial dated 27 December 1788, by Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) sent to the Chairman of the East India Company on the Possibility of Introducing Tea Cultivation into India, 27 December 1788, OIOC, Mss. Eur. D 993.
[19] Deepak Kumar, "The Evolution of Colonial Science in India", in MacKenzie, *Imperialism and the Natural World*, pp.51-66.

manage to grow tea in Penang, but its low quality and his superiors' lack of interest turned his attention to other projects.[20]

But quite soon, the Company would engage in a volte face, with all its resources directed towards finding an alternate abode for tea, preferably within its own territories. While a prize had already been instituted in Britain for the first person who would successfully grow tea outside China,[21] it was not until the abolition of the Company's monopoly in 1833 that this quest acquired urgency. By 1837, the Directors were even objecting to members of the medical corps conducting 'agricultural or horticultural experiments' or enquiring into 'matters connected with natural history' that would not aid the cause of 'the peculiar question of the practicability of cultivating the tea-plant with a view to its manufacture as an article of commerce'.[22] Tea combined with sugar, the luxuries of the eighteenth century, was rapidly on the way to joining beer as the British national drink, and the conviction was strong that 'some better guarantee should be provided for the continued supply of this article, than that at present furnished by the mere toleration of the Chinese government'.[23] This changed attitude towards the beverage had elevated the quest for its replacement from a domain of disinterested (and thus impractical) science to that of commerce, as the deliberations of the Tea Committee established by Lord William Bentinck made clear. 'If we should succeed...Bengal would be possessed of an additional staple for export nearly equal in value to that of the aggregate mass of indigenous articles now shipped to England.'[24]

By the 1830s, the new plan for tea, as for other botanical resources of 'considerable national importance', was for its acclimatisation under the British flag. 'We can

---

[20] Parliamentary Papers 1839, *Papers Relating to Measures for Introducing Cultivation of Tea Plant in British Possessions in India*, Vol. XXXIX, Paper 63; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 1 February 1834; Observations on Cultivation of Tea Plant, for Commercial Purposes in the Mountainous parts of Hindostan; drawn up at the desire of Rt. Hon. C. Grant, by N. Wallich.

[21] Edward Bramah, *Tea and Coffee: A Modern View of Three Hundred Years of Tradition*, London, 1972, p.81; cited by Alan and Iris Macfarlane, "Green Gold: The Empire of Tea." (Forthcoming, London, 2003).

[22] CD to B, 23 Aug 1837, IOR E/4/752, quoted by Deepak Kumar, "The Evolution."

[23] PP 1839; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 1 February 1834; Proposition to the Hon. Directors of the East India Company to cultivate Tea upon the Nepaul hills, and such other parts of the territories of the East India Company as may be suitable to its growth, by John Walker.

scarcely doubt that when the skill and science of the Europeans, aided by thermometers etc. should once be applied to the cultivation and preparation of tea in favourable situations, the Chinese tea will soon be excelled in quality and favour.'[25] The mode for tea cultivation, whether it was to be grown by planters or peasants, on estates or fields, was unclear. But while the superior expertise of the Oriental tea grower received attention, it was presumed that the Western botanist would soon surpass his knowledge. Indeed, it was imperative that he should do so, with tea taking on the aspect of a holy grail for the Company's finances. 'It is also an object of great importance to the East India Company to obtain facilities to bring home their territorial revenues, which at present they have very imperfect means of doing.'[26] Considering that it annually purchased approximately nine million pounds' worth of China tea, the Company hoped that its domestication would solve its recurrent economic crises. As its political control over Bengal advanced, the Company's fiscal problem had become even more convoluted, especially with the dilemma about remittances. In an age where mercantilist ideas had not fully disappeared, the outflow of bullion was another economic sin laid at the Company's door. The solutions to this predicament were few - either a resort to more ruthless taxation, or a growth in the tax base, or perhaps, the cultivation of commodities to redress the trade balance. It was that last alluring prospect that Company patronage - of agrarian science in general and tea cultivation in particular - hoped to achieve.

Previous fears that the British tea quest would fail to find the unique qualities of soil and climate that the Chinese plant enjoyed were now being dispelled.[27] A memorial from John Walker passionately assured Bentinck that it was a delusion 'that China was the only country where the tea plant would grow...the Burmese, the Japanese and Brazilians...have cultivated tea with success and we may confidently state that if in future we are not rendered independent of the Chinese, by producing tea from our own territories and colonies, it would be our own fault'.[28] The failure of Wallich's Penang experiment was attributable only to that area's unsuitable altitude. In support

---

[24] PP 1839; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 12 May 1834; Tea Committee to Revenue Department, 15 March 1834; Minute by Secretary at meeting of 13 February 1834.
[25] PP 1839; Proposition by Walker.
[26] Ibid.
[27] PP 1839; Minute by Governor General W.C. Bentinck, 24 January 1834.
[28] PP1839; Proposition by Walker.

of this, Walker cited the evidence of Abel, the botanist who had accompanied Lord Amherst to China that, 'from every account given of the tea plant, it succeeds best on the sides of mountains'.[29] Other travel reports supported this, with Buchanan having found that the 'Birman' Empire's 'chief plant of renown is the tea plant...cultivated on the Sheen hills'.[30] Such an array of testimonies had convinced the Company that an essential requirement was to find suitably elevated altitudes where the tea plant could be propagated. The Burma and the Nepal wars had brought extensive tracts of the Himalayan foothills into British hands and those could be suitable environs for the plant to be introduced. If that project achieved success, the particular advantage of Britain's own production of tea would be added to the general one of providing a use for otherwise unproductive hilly regions.[31]

In 1834, with the backing of the Governor-General, himself a self-professed 'practical agriculturist', a Tea Committee was constituted for British India, with twelve members, Nathaniel Wallich and the Calcutta merchant G.J. Gordon among them. The latter was soon dispatched to China to collect tea plants and seed for transplantation to Indian locales, and to Java to gather information about Dutch tea ventures.[32] Gordon's opium trading activity was the connection through which other Calcutta merchants such as William Prinsep and Dwarkanath Tagore became aware of this tea enterprise.[33] The Calcutta trading world also provided the two Indian members of this Committee - Radhakanta Deb and Ram Comul Sen. In March, the Committee sent out a circular addressed to all commissioners, particularly those of hill districts, asking for details of their areas which might fit in with the Committee's scientific criteria for tea lands. But, as fate would have it, long before these official enquiries were underway, an indigenous tea plant had already been found by the 'man on the spot'.[34]

---

[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] PP1839; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 1 February 1834; Observations by N. Wallich.
[32] PP 1839; Tea Committee, 15 March 1834.
[33] See Blair B. Kling, *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India*, Berkeley, 1976.
[34] P.J. Marshall, *Trade and Conquest: Studies on the Rise of British Dominance in India*, Aldershot, 1993.

1 (2) Science and the Savage

In Upper Assam, the tea plant grew in wild abundance and the Singpho and Khamti people used its leaves for a beverage, as the first British travellers to that remote land were to discover. After Captain Welsh's departure from Ahom territory in 1793, Sir John Shore's policy of non-interference precluded any direct Company intervention but a motley assemblage of European and Bengali traders still congregated at the customs outposts on the Goalpara border, and against Ahom regulations, sometimes beyond.[35] Two of them, the brothers Robert and Charles Bruce learnt about the local use of tea as early as 1823.[36] But it was only a decade later, once Assam was in Company hands, and its quest for tea was in full swing, that this 'native plant' obtained official notice. In the very year of its institution, the Tea Committee could declare that a 'discovery...by far the most important and valuable that has ever been made on matters connected with the agricultural or commercial resources of this empire' had been made - 'the tea shrub is beyond all doubt indigenous to Upper Assam'.[37]

A striking insight into the growing 'professionalisation' of scientific knowledge is afforded from the manner in which the East India Company's officials displayed scepticism towards information about tea from such local sources. Company experts were wont to regard many of the men on the spot as unreliable mavericks lacking proper scientific knowledge for their claims. The first attempt from Assam to convince Calcutta experts had fizzled out in 1827 when the forest plants dispatched by David Scott on behalf of the Bruce brothers were dismissed by the former as a type of camellia.[38] A few years later, Lieutenant Andrew Charlton of the Assam Light Infantry stationed at Sadiya sent some specimens of the local plant to Dr John Tytler of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society. This too met with a rebuff. It was only

---

[35] S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771-1826*, Guwahati, 1949, p.1.

[36] PP 1839; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 7 January 1835; Jenkins to Revenue Dept, 7 May 1834.

[37] PP 1839; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 7 January 1835; From Tea Committee to Revenue Dept, 24 December 1834.

[38] Ibid.

in 1834 that Charlton's identification was finally taken seriously by the Tea Committee.[39]

Charlton stated that 'the Singphos and Kamptees are in the habit of drinking an infusion of the leaves, which I have lately understood they prepare by pulling them into small pieces, taking out the stalks and fibres, boiling and then squeezing them into a ball, which they dry in the sun and retain for use'.[40] He further bolstered his case by comparing those local leaves with what he had observed in previous postings of 'the tea plant in different parts of the world, and lately in New Holland, propagated by seeds brought direct from China'.[41] Six months later, he sent the Committee seeds and leaves personally grown by him, prepared into 'something like tea'. He now reported that the plant was 'indigenous to this place...and grows wild everywhere and there all the way from this, about a month's journey to the Chinese province Yunnan, where I am told it is extensively cultivated'.[42] This was the first mooting of an expansive plan to link Assam, Burma and China, an idea that would long persist in the imperial imagination. 'What a pity there is no means of communication between Sadiya and Yunnan. A good land road...and there are no natural obstacles of any consequence to prevent it, would afford an outlet for British merchandize into the very heart of China.'[43]

The next step was for a scientific delegation, acting on behalf of the Committee, to confirm the existence of the tea jungles in Upper Assam on the lands held by the Singpho Gams and the adjoining Matak chief, the Bar Senapati. The delegates were further required to collect 'the greatest variety procurable of botanical, geological and other details...before ulterior measures may be successfully taken with regard to the cultivation of the tea shrub in that country'.[44] Apart from Nathaniel Wallich, another noted botanist William Griffith was also on the team. Since the idea was to gather as much information as possible about a previously unknown region, a geological expert

---

[39] PP1839; Charlton to Jenkins, 17 May 1834.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] PP 1839; Charlton to Jenkins, 8 November 1834.
[43] Ibid.
[44] PP 1839; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 7 January 1835; Tea Committee to Revenue Dept, 24 December 1834.

John M'Clelland accompanied them, Griffith would go on to join Captain Hannay's Ava expedition to examine other natural resources in Assam and Burma.[45]

Once this delegation had authenticated Charlton's information, matters proceeded very quickly indeed. Scientific expertise would now set to improving the natural resource that this remote territory had unexpectedly provided. The wisdom of the age dictated that this bounty could be of proper use only after its modification by Chinese culture and Western science. As the botanist Griffith made clear in his report, the indigenous plant of Assam, like its populace, was unacceptably savage. This opinion fitted well into a contemporary agenda where different parts of the Orient were located in a hierarchy where a wilderness such as Assam ranked far below China, or even other parts of India.

> The most important is the importation of Chinese seeds of unexceptionable quality, and of small numbers of the finest sorts of tea plant. I imagine that the importation of even the inferior kinds would be more likely to lead to the produce of a marketable article than the cultivation of a wild, or (to use our Indian notions) a more expressive term, jungly stock. It is obvious that the pollen of the Chinese plants must be applied to the stigmata of those of Assam. By repeating the experiments indefinitely it may be expected that the indigenous plants of Assam will lose most or all of those bad qualities that may with reason be supposed to exist in it.[46]

Once the decision to tap the tea jungles was taken, the commercial and military entrepreneur Charles Bruce seemed the best person to take charge, with his extensive knowledge of the area. His remit was to convey their samples, as speedily as possible, to the ultimate arbiter of Indian tea's commercial future - the London auctioneer. Bruce was relieved of his gunboats and put in charge of the Company's experimental operations in Upper Assam. By January 1838, his first batch of tea had reached

---

[45] John M'Clelland, although nominally a geologist, would go on to publish the first account of Assam's zoology in The Quarterly Journal of July 1837. William Griffith's Report on the Tea Plant of Upper Assam, initially submitted as part of the report to Parliament and then published from Calcutta in 1840 would remain one of the most influential works on tea. The posthumous papers he bequeathed to the East India Company on his death in 1845 were published as Journal of Travels in Assam, Burma, Bootan, Afghanistan and the neighbouring countries by the late William Griffith, arranged by John M'Clelland, Calcutta, 1847-48.

[46] PP 1839; Extract India Revenue Consultations 20 June 1836; Report on the Tea Plant of Upper Assam, by Mr. Assistant-surgeon William Griffith, Madras Establishment, late Member of Assam Deputation.

London, receiving a cautiously positive verdict.[47] This was signal enough to attract metropolitan investors to the imperial tea project. In February 1839, the provisional committee of an Assam Tea Association met in London to form a company with a capital of 500,000 pounds. However, they were not the first in this field. The Bengal Tea Association had already been instituted for the same purpose in Calcutta, initiated by Carr, Tagore and Co, with a membership that included eminent figures such as Dwarkanath Tagore, William Prinsep and James Pattle. Ultimately, the London and Calcutta groups decided to amalgamate into a single Assam Company and the production of tea was duly turned over from Government into the care of private capital.[48]

In this entire discourse around tea, whether in the economic arguments given by Walker or the scientific ones by Griffith and Wallich, tea was taken to represent the inexorable advance of science, commerce and civilisation. The proletarian in the mother country and the native in the colony comprised a growing pool of demand for a beverage whose potential for moral and economic improvement could not be overestimated. By 1851, Assam's identification with this commodity had acquired the seal of imperial approbation, with the Assam Company's award of a medal at the Great Exhibition for its display of tea.[49] However, the appellation of 'Assam' to this product was still something of a misnomer. Since it had been decided that the 'savage' native product would not suit the refined London palate, Bruce's first task had been to ameliorate it by the application of Chinese seed and labour. It was only in the 1880s that the hybrid tea marketed from the Assam plantations was finally abandoned in favour of the indigenous variety. While the pioneering scientists of empire such as Wallich and Griffith received kudos for the tea experiment, in reality, their obsession with 'authenticity' and 'hierarchy' derailed the project to a considerable extent. In the final analysis, the grand imperial nexus of China seed and Botanical Garden science was far less effective for the progress of tea than the ground level interactions of colonial and indigenous forces within the locality.

---

[47] H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company*, 1839-1953, Edinburgh, 1957, pp. 263-6.
[48] Antrobus, *A History*, pp.35-40.

1 (3) A New El Dorado

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Assam was becoming the focus for a number of expeditions, surveys and writings, based upon its strategic location as well as for the growing commercial potential it represented.[50] Precolonial isolation, stemming as much from the region's ecology as from its political circumstances, had meant that the standard information gleaned from travelers' accounts was virtually absent.[51] As H.H. Wilson observed in 1858, this was among the few countries 'almost unknown at this period to European geography, having been hitherto closed against the Company's officers by their inherent physical difficulties, the barbarous habits of the people and the jealousy of their chiefs'.[52] The extant British knowledge on the eve of conquest consisted of the reports of John Peter Wade and Francis Buchanan and was based on secondhand information rather than direct observation of the details dear to the surveyor.[53] In 1830, a compilation of information on the region from the tea entrepreneur James Buckingham still found it necessary to apologise that as no European had penetrated far beyond the capital of Gauhati, 'accurate data' were lacking.[54]

But within a few decades, knowledge about Assam was reaching hitherto unprecedented heights, inspired by the region's seemingly idyllic prospects. A substantial body of 'topographical' information was generated through men such as the surgeon John MacCosh, who declared it, whether from 'a commercial, a statistical or a political point of view' equal to none.[55] His mention of the extensive availability of lime, coal, oil and gold influenced the London merchants to choose the general appellation of the Assam Company, so as to be able to harvest those other resources at

---

[49] Ibid, p.85.
[50] For details of expeditions by Wilcox, Pemberton, see Verrier Elwin ed., *India's Northeast Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, Bombay, 1959.
[51] Alleged classical references to Assam in the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, the Chinese pilgrim Hieun Tsang's account and those from the medieval period such as Shihab al-din Talib's *Fathiyah-i-ibriyah* found their way into publication in organs such as the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and were to be reproduced by pioneering local historians such as S. K. Bhuyan from the 1930s.
[52] H.H. Wilson, *The History of British India from 1805 to 1835*, London, 1858 (reprint 1997), p.7.
[53] Benudhar Sarma ed., *An Account of Assam, 1800 by John Peter Wade*, North Lakhimpur, 1927; Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, London, 1820 (reprint Guwahati, 1963).
[54] James Buckingham, *An Account of the Burman Empire, and of the Kingdom of Assam*, Calcutta, 1830, p.97.
[55] MacCosh, *Topography of Assam*, p.15.

a later date.[56] Until the collapse of the tea speculation boom in the 1860s, Assam was engulfed by a rush of speculators looking to enrich themselves upon what promised to be the new El Dorado of imperial agrarian enterprise.

The most authoritative addition to this new body of knowledge came from a missionary-turned-administrator, William Robinson - A Descriptive Account of Asam with a sketch of the local geography, and a complete history of the tea-plant of Asam.[57] Robinson was the headmaster of the Gauhati school, the first one established by the colonial government. He had come into Assam on behalf of the Serampore mission in 1836, but when finances forced retrenchment, he transferred his services to the state educational department. He subsequently developed a close relationship with the Assam Company, and was later buried in the manager's compound at Nazira with an epitaph of the 'Historian of Assam'.[58] His work ambitiously aimed at a comprehensive description of 'the climate and its influence on man, its geology, botany and zoology, its history and political geography, as well as the civil and social state of the indigenous people'.[59] Until the first official district gazetteers appeared in 1905-6, Robinson's text retained tremendous influence over both colonial and indigenous contributors to the new 'information order'.

Among the sources for Robinson's work were a few indigenous texts known as buranjis, political chronicles associated with the precolonial Ahom regime.[60] This local genre of officially sponsored texts had initially come to British notice in the late eighteenth century with the examples that Thomas Welsh and John Wade had

---

[56] Antrobus, *A History*, p.37. In the 1880s, the Assam Company was able to mine its own coal from Naga territory where it was given exemption from the Inner Line restrictions.
[57] William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, Calcutta, 1841.
[58] Antrobus, *A History*, p.346.
[59] Robinson, *A Descriptive Account*, Preface.
[60] David Wyatt, in his work on the 'earliest' chronicle traditions indigenous to Siam, the 'tamnan', sees them as having much in common with the indigenous historiography of such Tai peoples as the Ahom of Assam, the Shan of Burma and Yunnan, the Lao of northern Siam and Laos, the Lu of southwest China and the various upland Tai peoples of Laos, northern Vietnam and southern China. An important component of such texts was the succession of rulers, often related in the form of a list embellished with brief tales of their exploits, as well as their services to their religion. See Wyatt, *Studies in Thai History*, Chiang Mai, 1994. Also see Sayeeda Yasmin Saikia, "A Name Without a People: Searching to be Tai-Ahom in Modern India," Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Wisconsin, 1999.

obtained for their superiors at Calcutta.[61] In 1809, Francis Buchanan Hamilton noted that the Assamese possessed 'some books called bulongji, written in a character that appears on the old coins, and which seems to have a strong affinity with that of Ava.'[62] In actuality, most of these chronicles were being written in the Assamiya language by the eighteenth century, with patronage from an increasingly Sanskritised Ahom court.

In the wake of the British conquest, this genre achieved a new career. The first step was taken by a revenue *seristadar* of 'rank and respectability', Haliram Dhekial Phukan (d.1831) when he published from Calcutta his Assam Buranji orthat Assam Desher Itihas ('Assam Buranji or an itihasa of the land of Assam').[63] This, the first printed work originating from Assam, broke with previous convention by being written in Bengali, the better to carry out its stated intention, of providing information about Assam to the reading public of Bengal. But since its emphasis remained upon the region's sacred geography and Puranic lineage, the overall narrative did not depart substantially from the tradition of its manuscript precursors. It would take a few more years before this genre of neo-buranji would generate a more tangible interaction with the new parameters of colonial knowledge.

Such an effort appeared in 1875, another Assam Buranji, this time from the pen of Haliram's nephew, Gunabhiram Barua (1837-94), who combined a career in the colonial administration (retiring as Extra Assistant Commissioner) with a prominent position in the new vernacular world of literary production and social reform.[64] In a pivotal shift from Haliram's, his text was written in the new print vernacular of Assamese, clearly looking to an indigenous audience within the region itself. In true

---

[61] See H.K. Barpujari, ed., *An Account of Assam and Her Administration*, Guwahati, 1988, for an English adaptation of a buranji forwarded by David Scott, Agent to the Governor General, North East Frontier, as his annexure in support of his report of 15 April 1826 strongly urging the restoration of an Ahom prince to Upper Assam under the protection of the government, by stressing the positive qualities of the 'ancient constitution' that the buranji portrayed. Also see Robert Travers, "Contested Notions of Sovereignty in Bengal" for the idea of the 'ancient constitutions' of Indian governments.

[62] Buchanan Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, p.5.

[63] Haliram Dhekial Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, Calcutta, 1829 (reprint Guwahati, 1962). His work overlapped with the last productions in the older buranji tradition, such as the text compiled by Kasinath Tamuli Phukan under Purandar Singha's orders and published by the American missionaries in 1844.

[64] Gunabhiram Barua became a Brahmo, wrote a number of Assamese books focusing on social issues such as women's education and widow remarriage and edited a pioneering though short lived periodical, the Assam Bandhu from Calcutta in 1885-6.

gazetteer mode, the text opened by precisely specifying the boundaries and dimensions of its subject territory, the healthiness or otherwise of its landscape and its possession of mineral and other natural wealth.[65] Such an emphasis on natural resources was all the more essential in view of the text's destiny as a textbook in the new state schools. Only after this preamble to Nature, did the narrative move on to the usual concern of the buranji genre, with a description of Assam's dynastic past. But then the text shifted back into the present, with its description of the *unnati* ('progress') British rule had initiated, and the pivotal role therein of the Assam Company's tea enterprise.[66]

This approval of the new British enterprise found renewed expression in the next aspirant to the buranji tradition, the Ahom publicist, Padmanath Gohain Barua (1871-1946). The seventh edition of his Assam Buranji, appearing in 1907, proudly claimed that it had improved upon its predecessors through its inclusion of an entire new chapter entitled "The Tea Industry in Assam".[67] Such accolades from this emergent intelligentsia provide a significant counterpoint to the views expressed by the notables attached to the old order. One of the last manuscripts produced under courtly patronage, by Dutiram Hazarika in the 1830s, depicted the end of the Swargadeos' rule as caused by the Sahibs' desire to turn the country into a vast tea garden.[68] Yet such contrasting sentiments cannot be attributed to a simple dichotomy between 'traditional' and 'modern' elites. Indeed, it was the most prominent figure among the old aristocracy, Maniram Barbhandar Barua (1806-57) who had assisted the Assam Company through this early phase of its career. But, as the nineteenth century wore on, the growing 'racialisation' of the colonial economy that Amiya Bagchi describes meant that autonomous possibilities for indigenous enterprise were fast shrinking in scope.[69]

---

[65] Gunabhiram Barua, *Assam Buranji*, Calcutta, 1875 (reprint Guwahati, 1972), pp.1-4.
[66] Ibid, p.169.
[67] Padmadhar Gohain Barua, *Assam Buranji*, Tezpur, 1907. Its first edition was in 1899, and another one in 1916.
[68] Dutiram Hazarika's verse Mss was recovered and published with another text of the same period by the local scholar S. K. Bhuyan with the title of *Assamar Padya Buranji*, Guwahati, 1932 (reprint 1984), p.209.
[69] Amiya K. Bagchi, *Private Investment in India, 1900-39*, Cambridge, 1974.

1 (4) European enterprise preferred

From MacCosh to Padmanath, what these paeans to the new order had glossed over was the bleak prospect faced by most of Assam's inhabitants in the first years of British rule. As Amalendu Guha estimates, the devastation of the Burmese invasions meant that by 1826, the population was reduced to an estimated third of what it was sixty years previously. All the shock effects of a painful economic transition were felt with the British advent, with the precolonial revenue settlement based on periodic service and/or in-kind payments replaced by a new proprietary system involving payment of *ryot*s' dues to the government in cash. The strain upon Assam's barter-oriented, money-short economy was worsened by an acute cash crisis, with the ex-Raja's mint defunct and a shortage of British-Indian currency. The government's revenue collection in local currency was annually remitted to Calcutta for recoinage. But this hardly made any difference, as the remittance represented a surplus of revenue over local disbursements and resulted in the withdrawal of a considerable quantity of circulating media.[70] The ensuing money crisis made it very difficult for peasant dues to be paid to the government in cash.

> The want of coin [is]...such that cloths of certain fixed dimensions, salt, iron hoes and other articles in general use pass current instead of money. Since the accession of the British government, the labour of paiks is commuted for a money payment without any considerable addition being made to the currency...grain...almost ceases to be saleable when offered in any quantity, the extensive paddy stores of some revenue defaulters having lately been disposed of by public auction at Rs 12 for two maunds.[71]

Hundreds of defaulting ryots resorted to the traditional peasant remedy of voting with their feet and migrating to territory not yet within the British revenue net. The population stayed almost stationary until the 1840s, from a rough estimate of seven or eight lakhs for 1826, a very different picture from the glowing prospectus that the London capitalist was being offered.[72]

The first Company administrators for the region, David Scott (1825-31) and Francis Jenkins (1834-66) were in agreement that the quickest way out of the crisis was to

---

[70] Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, pp. 142-5.
[71] Foreign Political Consultations, No. 51, 7 May 1830; Letter from David Scott to G. Swinton, Chief Secretary, Fort William, 17 April 1830, NAI.
[72] Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, p.145.

develop Assam's export potential. However, they had varied ideas on how this was to be done. In Scott's scheme of things, improvement should ideally happen on the basis of available local resources and skills. He laid stress on encouraging the production of opium, *muga* and mulberry silk, enterprises which could be extended without having to bring in a European-managed plantation system as for indigo. He advocated that the government should take on an entrepreneurial role, introducing modern techniques through technical training and demonstration farms.[73] Scott's ideas, perhaps predictably enough, were cold-shouldered by his superiors on the grounds of expenditure.

By the time of Scott's successor, the Charter Act of 1833 was offering land ownership in the colonies to Europeans, and Francis Jenkins' scheme was premised upon that fact. 'The settlement of Englishmen of capital on its wastes of these frontiers seems...to offer a better prospect for the speedy realisation of improvements than any measures that could be adopted in the present ignorant and demoralised state of native inhabitants'.[74] Jenkins was following in the wake of Bentinck and his Council who had decided that 'an active policy of European colonisation' would be the only effective agency of 'reform and modernisation'.[75] In Assam, such improvement could only come about by attracting European planters and their capital through grants which should be altogether freehold, subject to no other condition than the payment of a fixed and unalterable rate of rent and absolutely unencumbered with any stipulations in regard to ryots or subtenants.[76] Emanating as it did from a corresponding member of the Agricultural Society, Jenkins' scheme was a colonial transplantation of the 'patriotism' then modifying itself in the metropole into a broad assemblage of 'agrarian imperialist' ideas.[77]

---

[73] Foreign Political Consultations, No. 50, 10 June 1838, Letter from Scott to Swinton, 18 May 1831, NAI.
[74] Foreign Political Consultations, No. 90, 11 February 1835, Letter from Francis Jenkins to Swinton, 22 July 1833, NAI.
[75] C.H. Phillips, Introduction, *Correspondence of Lord William Bentinck*, vol.1, xxx, quoted B.B Misra, *The Unification*, p.18.
[76] A.J. Moffat Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1854 (reprint Guwahati, 1982), pp.16-17.
[77] C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: the British Empire and the World, 1780-1830*, London, 1989, pp.155-60.

The growing prospect for tea cultivation made Jenkins's offer very attractive. The Wastelands Rules, promulgated in 1838 and revised in 1854, provided for long-term lease of land to applicants who possessed capital or stock worth at least three rupees per acre and who had applied for not less than a hundred acres. While they did not expressly discriminate against indigenous applicants, these requirements were such that only Europeans would have the necessary wherewithal to avail of the government concessions. Such a policy of active discouragement to indigenous applicants was justified since 'natives have no capital and their only resource is to settle other ryots to settle in these grants so that as much or even more becomes waste in one place than is reclaimed in the other'.[78] This dismissal of the indigene as anything other than brutish raw material was integral to Jenkins's plans for improving the province.

> We have...an unlimited range of wastes, wastes enough for three or four millions of people, which implies, of course, that our population is very scanty, and what is worse, they are very rude; fine, able, strong men, but without the introduction of a more civilised race they are not convertible to immediate use.[79]

In 1840, two-thirds of the government's experimental tea gardens had been transferred to the Assam Company, free of rent for at least the first ten years.[80] The total acreage under tea went up from 2311 acres in 1841 to 8000 acres in 1859.[81] Until 1850, the Assam Company was the only European entrepreneur, but nine years later, the number of estates under different proprietors had increased to fifty-one. Between 1839 and 1901, tea planters, almost all Europeans, were settled with 642 acres or more than a quarter of the total settled area of the Assam Valley. They held more than 85% of their lands on privileged terms. For instance, of the 595,842 acres held by them in 1893, 55% were fee simple (perpetually revenue-free) and another 30% were assessed at low concessional rates, much lower than what the peasant paid for similar land. Thus, only for about 15% of their holdings did the tea planters pay comparable rates to the local cultivators.[82]

---

[78] Mills, *Report*, p.16.
[79] PP 1839; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 7 January 1835; From Jenkins to Tea Committee, 6 January 1835.
[80] Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, pp.145-55.
[81] Ibid, p.159.
[82] Guha, "A Big Push Without a Take-off: A Case-Study of Assam: 1871-1901": Reply to Comment," Indian Economic and Social History Review, December 1974, pp.474-9.

This tea enterprise took shape as one of the speculative frenzies that periodically overtook the age of the Industrial Revolution, until its bubble burst with the economic depression in the 1860s. Its attraction was such that three deputy commissioners, four assistant commissioners and several police officers threw up their appointments to engage in tea planting. They were joined by the many Assam Company employees who used the experience (and raw materials) that the former had provided to start their own plantations.[83] Among the latter was one 'native', the former dewan ('land agent') of the Assam Company, Maniram Barbhandar Barua. He was the son of Ramdutta (d.1848), a minister under the last Ahom king.[84] Like the majority of Assam's elites, his family fled to Bengal when the Burmese overran Assam. Maniram started his career as a gomastha with Captain Neufville during the latter's expeditions against the Singphos and the Khamtis in 1824-5. Later, he was appointed to the charge of revenue seristadar and tehsildar. In contrast to the aristocrats at the top of the precolonial hierarchy who lacked the literate skills to prosper under the new regime, Maniram and his peers among the caste Hindu gentry were able to use their scribal competence to good effect. When Purandar Singha was installed as the tributary ruler of Upper Assam in 1833, Maniram was appointed as his Barbhandar Barua. The administrative experience he had garnered in the Company's service came in useful and Captain Jenkins, though implacably opposed to Purandar's rule, was able to say, 'The reins of government are held by the minister Muneeram, who is one of the few talented men His Majesty can boast of in his dominion'.[85]

Possibly, it was Maniram's influence that prompted the restored Ahom ruler to envisage participating in the new tea enterprise that the British were extending into his domains.

> Raja Poorunder Sing makes no hesitation in placing the Gubroo hill at the disposal of Government; but he is anxious to retain one-half of the hill, that he may carry on the cultivation of the tea plants, on that half, simultaneously with us on the other, and that the superintendents and overseers of the

---

[83] Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, p.171.
[84] Ramdutta was later granted a mouzadar's post by Captain Brodie in 1833. Cited by Benudhar Sarma, *Maniram Dewan*, Calcutta, 1950, p.32.
[85] Francis Jenkins, "Journals of a Tour of Upper Assam,"1838, DHAS.

> Government should instruct his people in the management of the plant and manufacture of tea.[86]

As events transpired, it was rather a misfortune for the Raja that the attention of the tea entrepreneurs had shifted from the wild Singpho and Matak lands to his realm.[87] Captain Jenkins soon recommended that Purandar's territory go back into Company hands.[88] The raja's hopes for involving himself in tea cultivation gave way before this arbitrary action, with his deposition on the usual charges of misgovernment. The impact of Jenkins' policy made itself felt even some forty years later, when the king of Manipur pleaded with the British Political Officer to abandon his plans to introduce tea into the region, for were they to succeed, he would lose his kingdom to the planters.[89]

In 1836, with his ministerial post rendered redundant, Maniram joined the newly set up Assam Company as its dewan, partly on the strength of his strong recommendation from Jenkins. The Company's Calcutta associate, William Prinsep on his visit in 1841, was loud in his praises.

> I find the Native Department of the office in the most beneficial state under the excellent direction of Muneeram, whose intelligence and activity is of the greatest value to our Establishment. There is not a question regarding expenditure or return which he is not ready to answer from Book in the most satisfactory manner. The marts which he is establishing at and around our location will, he declares, become of considerable importance.[90]

With similar positive appraisal of his work in the Assam Company's annual report, it becomes difficult to trace exactly where the parting of the ways came about. Local tradition asserts that it was the racist attitudes of the Assam company's British personnel which forced its native dewan to leave.[91] In the initial years, Maniram had

---

[86] PP 1839; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 11 July 1836, From Jenkins to Wallich, 5 May 1836.
[87] The Singpho uprising of 1843, in which the tea-cultivating chieftain Ningroola had taken part, caused both the tea plantations and the missionary station to be moved from the Sadiya area to the upper reaches of the Assam Valley which, under Scott's advocacy, had been returned to the native regency of Purandar Singha.
[88] Francis Jenkins, "Journals".
[89] Macfarlane, "Green Gold," p.8.
[90] *Assam Company Report of Local Directors to Shareholders at a General Meeting*, Calcutta, 1841, li.
[91] The established account of this is by the self-described local 'peripatetic historian', Benudhar Sarma, *Maniram Dewan*. It draws upon an earlier account published under a pseudonym by Nilkumud [Indibar] Barua, a publicist who was related to Maniram by marriage, and included him in a narrative of heroic figures from the past, ranging from the Ahom warrior Lachit Barphukan who had vanquished the invading Mughal forces to the dubhashi Haliram Dhekial Phukan, stressing his assertions of equality vis-a-vis the Company ~~Bahadur~~'s servants such as Colonel Adam White. Maniram himself

proved very useful as a mediator between the Company and the indigenous power structures. Tea cultivation was only one of the areas where he tendered his services, and one that was as new to him as to the British, but he was able to use his local knowledge to promote it. However, in the inevitable systematisation of colonial rule that was coming up, services such as his would find much less demand.

As other employees before him had done, Maniram established two tea plantations of his own, at Cinnamara near Jorhat and Singlo near Nazira. His ineligibility as a native to enjoy the same government concessions as European planters meant that he had to pay about five hundred rupees in land revenue for those two thousand *bighas* of land. Apparently, it was this entrepreneurial zeal to which the Assam Company had taken exception, and he was suspended on charges of diverting its seed and labour to his own needs. The records are silent as to the results of the enquiry into his alleged peculations, but Maniram did leave the Company's service soon afterwards, probably in 1845. Here, it needs to be pointed out that almost all the new European gardens were established by Assam Company employees who had liberally pilfered its resources.[92] Whether Maniram was guilty of this is not the point at issue here, but the fact remains that none of those white entrepreneurs faced similar retribution.

It is worth keeping in mind that the mid-nineteenth century saw indigenous participation in mercantile capitalist networks around Calcutta subjected to a series of obstacles which would drive it virtually to extinction. For example, within the firm of Carr, Tagore and Co, Prinsep soon retired to England and the ascendancy that his partner Dwarkanath Tagore had acquired as a 'Merchant Prince' was to be inconceivable for his compatriots within the future course of empire.[93] Neatly enough, the other Indian associates of the Assam Company's Calcutta board disappear from its records over the next few years.[94] While Lord Auckland (1836-42) had hailed the growth of tea in Assam, 'a country of vast promise,' and looked forward to its

---

was shown as retaliating with interest to an Assam Company employee slapping him. Cited from Nilkumud [Indibar] Barua, *Jivandarsha*, Calcutta, 1891.

[92] Antrobus, *A History*, pp.343-4.

[93] See Kling, *Partner in Empire* and Bagchi, *Private Investment*.

[94] Among its promoters had been Dwarkanath Tagore, Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Rustomjee Cowasjee, Motilal Seal and Haji Ispahani. Of them, Seal and Prasanna Kumar Tagore served in 1839 and 1839-41 as Directors. Cited in Guha, *Medieval and Colonial Assam*, p.173.

development by the application of European and Indian capital, in the next few decades the latter would find itself circumscribed and controlled by the former.[95]

As the new regime gradually consolidated its hold over Assam, local intermediaries such as Maniram were increasingly indignant at the subservient position into which they were now being forced, compared to their initial privileged status. When he had worked alongside Captain Neufville and Purandar Singha, Maniram's authority had been such that he was dubbed the Kalita Raja of Upper Assam.[96] Unlike the new generation of *babus* such as Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua whom Calcutta education and service pilgrimages socialised into Western influenced ideas, Maniram's notions of state legitimacy were grounded in a traditional mode. This did not prevent him from attempting to forge links with Calcutta mercantile capital,[97] as well as with the new print world of useful information.[98] But as far as the new power structures were concerned, his dealings with the Assam Company and his critique of British policy to its officials caused him to be held in suspicion as 'clever but untrustworthy and intriguing'.[99] Maniram's dealings with the new regime ended upon the gallows in 1857, after an abortive attempt to restore the Ahom dynasty. His estates were confiscated, and acquired at a throwaway price by Captain Williamson, the founder of the managing agency house of Williamson and Magor.[100] A vernacular tradition subsequently emerged, enshrining Maniram's memory in ballads and stories not just as a martyr of the 1857 revolt, but also as the indigenous pioneer of tea cultivation.[101] A counter narrative of the 'discovery' of tea was thereby created by

---

[95] Auckland Papers Addl. Mss. 37689-37718, British Library; Cited by Kling, *Partner*, p.70.
[96] The Kalita caste was a broad assemblage of 'clean' peasant and artisanal groups whose upper ranks, the Bor Kalita, had acquired considerable upward mobility in the later period of Ahom rule, and claimed descent from 'Kshatriya' migrations from Bengal and Kanauj.
[97] On a visit to Calcutta in 1836, Maniram reportedly met Calcutta merchants such as the Jagat Seth and Latu Babu, the son of Ramdulal Deb. He is also supposed to have discussed the issue of tea with Ram Comul Sen, who had been on the Tea Committee. Cited in Benudhar Sarma, *Maniram*, pp.92-5.
[98] Moneeram Revenue Saristadar Bur Bhandaree, "Native Account of Washing for Gold in Assam," (Communicated by Captain Jenkins to the Coal and Mineral Committee), Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, No. 79, July 1838, pp.621-25; Muneeram Bur Bhandaree Barrooa, "On the Mezangurree silk of Assam and plants whereof the worm feeds," Transactions of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India, Vol. 7, 1840.
[99] Mills, *Report*, p.516.
[100] Anjan Kumar Baruah, *Assamese Businessmen from Maniram Dewan to Robin Dutta*, Guwahati, 1992, p.10.
[101] Benudhar Sarma's book gave one version of the Assamese ballad "Maniramor Geet". He also reproduced a piece called "Night Shooting in the Dimu river" from The Asian Sporting Newspaper, 10 July, 1888, which carried an anonymous account of a boat trip by three 'Shahibs' with their tribal Miri boatmen, who 'gave out the verses of that Assamese song, by a Jorhat sage, on the capture of Muniram Dewan...all the shabibs being loudest...in the chorus.' Benudhar Sarma, *Maniram*, p.197. In the 1950s,

local nationalist lore, seeking to displace the European pioneer, whether Bruce or Charlton, and place his 'native informant', Maniram at centrestage.[102] But this nationalist mythology itself elided another indigenous figure - the Khamti and Singpho tribal of the original tea jungle.

1 (5) A Garden, for God or Man ?

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the colonial apparatus in the region consisted of a few overworked officials such as David Scott, Adam White and Francis Jenkins, supplemented by a handful of military and Assam Company personnel. In 1835, their ranks were supplemented by the American Baptist foreign mission. These missionaries had previously ministered to the Karen territory of Burma, and looking for a new field, were offered the Assam venture abandoned by the Serampore Baptists.[103] But instead of the former's base at Gauhati, the East India Company's officials advised them to commence at 'the northernmost point of territory inhabited by the great Shan family' at Sadiya, the extreme tip of Upper Assam. At Calcutta, Charles Trevelyan held out to them the rosy prospects for a prospective Shan mission at Sadiya.

> From this point an impression may be made upon Burmah, from an exactly opposite quarter from that at which it has heretofore been entered by the missionary. The communication is open with Yunnan, the westernmost province of China, and it is the intention of the Indian government to send out a mission there by this route, next cold season, for the purpose of enquiry about the culture of the tea plant. On the other side, Bhutan, and Thibet, and more countries and people than we have any accurate knowledge of at present, are open to the messengers of the Gospel; and lastly, the Shan language, which is near kin to the Burmese and Siamese, and belongs to the Chinese

---

Benudhar and other publicists began organising an annual commemoration of Maniram Diwas, on the anniversary of the latter's death, at his native village of Charing in Sibsagar.

[102] There emerges an interesting circularity about this discourse. The planter Samuel Baildon's *Tea in Assam* of 1877 carried an anecdote which Benudhar reproduced in his Assamese work, almost a century later. It was to the effect that 'various Calcutta merchants were discussing the chances of imported Chinese tea thriving in Assam, when a native from the province present, seeing some tea seed said, "We have the plant growing wild in our jungles." This was Moneeram Dewan, the first native next to the then Raja of Assam, a very rich man with plenty of local influence.' Benudhar Sarma, *Maniram*, p.104.

[103] William Carey's first convert Krishna Pal had been dispatched to Sylhet to spread the Word and reportedly had baptised several Khasis from the nearby hills. Serampore extended its reach to the Assam Valley in 1829 with a branch established by James Rae under David Scott's patronage. Both he and his successor William Robinson found a very scanty harvest and that, coupled with financial troubles, caused Serampore to withdraw backing in 1836. Robinson continued as an employee of the Government's educational establishment and was to take an adversarial attitude to the American Baptist missionaries on the issue of the vernacular language for use in the region.

> family, furnishes a ready means of intercourse with perhaps a greater number of people than any other language in the world, except Chinese itself.[104]

Like the votaries of the tea trade, the seekers for souls were being encouraged to see the jungles of Assam as the staging post for expansion beyond the Indian subcontinent.

However, it was not long before the missionaries realised that these grandiose plans were preposterous.[105] Nathan Brown expressed his dismay upon finding at Sadiya only a sparse population of 'Asamese, Singphos, Khamtis and Miris' with 'very few, if any, who can read'.[106] But the new colonial enterprise offered a ray of hope, he felt, after a tour of the tea *baris* with the superintendent, Charles Bruce.

> Although it is many years since the tea plant was discovered in these regions, yet it is only within one or two years that the subject has attracted the attention of Government. Last year a deputation was sent up to examine the grounds. Many thousands of tea plants were also sent up, fresh from China, which are to be transplanted at Suikhwa. There is no doubt that in a few years the tea trade will be carried on here extensively. This will produce a great change in the country, will fill it with a dense population, and convert these almost impenetrable jungles into the happy abodes of industry. If the means of grace are employed, may we not also hope that it will become a garden of the lord?[107]

In this discourse around the new improving enterprise, we can discern a significant semantic shift, from tea forests to tea gardens. Bruce appears to have pioneered the use of the term 'garden' alongside with its vernacular equivalent 'bari' in his correspondence with the Assam Company. In precolonial Assam, bari had a very particular connotation, referring to the raised or high lands suitable for homestead and garden sites, over which the peasants possessed hereditary proprietary rights. This was distinguished from the low-lying *rupit* lands which were used for wet rice cultivation and which were communally owned, and over which the peasant held only

---

[104] H.K. Barpujari ed., *The American Missionaries and Northeast India: 1836-1900, A Documentary Study*, Guwahati, 1986, p.4.

[105] The first missionaries, the Revs. Nathan Brown and Oliver T. Cutter who were sent to Assam from their previous base at Maulmein in Burma, reached Sadiya on 23 March, 1836, armed with Brown's knowledge of the Shan language and Cutter's printing press. They were reinforced by the Revs. Miles Bronson and Jacob Thomas in 1837, but the latter was killed in a river accident while travelling to Sadiya. All of them were accompanied by family members.

[106] Nathan Brown's Journal, Sadiya, 11 April, 1836. In Barpujari, *The American Missionaries,* p.7.

[107] Ibid.

usufruct rights. The tea baris that the Assam Company and other planters were operating could thus be understood as their private property - an important claim to be upheld considering the vast expanses of previously common land which came under their sway, with large portions usually remaining uncultivated.[108]

Even more significantly, 'garden' was placed in opposition to 'forest'. The initial discovery of tea had been in the lands ruled by the Singpho chiefs and the Bar Senapati. The scientific experts of the Tea Committee had made clear the urgency of acquiring this resource as quickly as possible, as it was too valuable to be left in the hands of these local authorities.

> In my humble opinion, the gamers or chiefs who own the Singfo tea tracts will not object to our leasing or purchasing them...procuring the forest lands on a long lease might, probably, insure all our purposes. Considering, however, the destructive manner in which the tracts in question have been hitherto treated by the natives and the injuries which most of them are at this time almost daily undergoing, I beg most earnestly to urge the necessity of immediate and effective measures being taken to secure the forests from further spoilation.[109]

This is a striking illustration of Richard Grove's argument that the colonial state frequently used programmes for resource control in order to justify political controls whose rationale on other grounds was dubious, to say the least. For instance, accusing forest dwellers of fomenting trouble became a recurrent feature of British political discussion.[110] The Singpho uprising at Sadiya in 1843, which killed a number of British troops and brought the Shan mission to an untimely end, was the logical outcome of this situation where the inhabitants of the tea forests had lamented that 'now it is said that where the tea grows, that is yours, but when we make sacrifice[s] we require tea for our funerals; we therefore perceive that you have taken all the country, and we, the old and respectable, cannot get tea to drink'.[111]

---

[108] Amalendu Guha, "A Big Push Without a Take-off: A Case-Study of Assam: 1871-1901": Reply to Comment.' His estimate is that only about 30% of the 1.5 million acres of land held or controlled by planters in 1947 were actually under tea cultivation. The vacant lands were occupied to keep away the latecomers, the Indian planters, and to attract tenants who could then be employed on the plantation itself in the peak season.

[109] PP 1839; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 4 April 1836; Wallich to Jenkins, 15 March 1836.

[110] Richard H. Grove, "Colonial Conservation, Ecological Hegemony and Popular Resistance: Towards A Global Synthesis" in MacKenzie, *Imperialism and the Natural World.*

At another level, this terminology of 'garden' served as a way of distinguishing between the 'jungly' variety of tea which Griffith had scornfully dismissed, and the superior strain that European expertise would produce. The forests were in the process of being transmuted by European capital and science, via Chinese agency, into a cultivated expanse blooming with tea. This was to be the harbinger, hopefully, of a more general transformation of a wild, unhealthy and jungle-laden region into an 'Assam...[which] might be converted into one continued garden of silk and cotton, of tea, coffee and sugar'.[112]

This vision of nature improved was not confined solely to the Occidental mind. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, the first native to be appointed to the post of magistrate, spelt out his own expectations of the new order in the new missionary periodical, the Orunodoi. 'O Gracious Lord of the World, do give these inhabitants of Assam the desire to render their land civilised, wise and pious...do bring that day when Assam will cease to be a forest and become a garden of flowers.'[113] A few years later, Gunabhiram Barua would voice a similar epiphany in his Assam Buranji. 'Almost fifty years ago, the news was received that the tea plant was growing in Assam. Its cultivation has now made substantial progress. Huge expanses of forest have been transformed into blooming and productive land.'[114] Having said this, we must note that other local groups were not so pleased with this transformation, as the Beesa Gaum ('chief') of the Singphos observed when asked for documentary evidence in support of his land claims. 'Now wherever you find land you make a tea garden; if it be so, there will be no room for the seventeen Gaums to remain'.[115]

Such an idyllic vision of unordered Nature blooming into ordered gardens requires examining as part of a general doctrine which Drayton calls the 'economics of Eden',

> An ideology of improvement which was fundamental to the making of the British Empire...an alliance of the farmer, the colonist, the merchant, religion and science...The makers of the first British Empire had found in Christianity,

---

[111] Foreign Political Consultations, No. 96, 12 August 1843; Letter from Beesa Gaum to the Agent to the Governor General, NAI.
[112] MacCosh, *Topography of Assam*, p.33.
[113] Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, "An Account of England," in Orunodoi, April 1847.
[114] Gunabhiram Barua, *Assam*, p.169.
[115] Foreign Political Consultations, No. 97, 12 August 1843; Letter from Beesa Gaum to Captain Brodie, Principal Assistant, Sibsagar, NAI.

> and their cultivation of land license for intrusion in Ireland and the New World. A later sacred theory of agriculture comforted those who imposed themselves on India, Australasia and Africa. The rational use of Nature replaced piety as the foundation of imperial Providence, government became the Demiurge, and universal progress, measured by material abundance, its promised land.[116]

The seductive power of this ideology, and the way it brought together ideas of civilisation and progress is apparent in its ready acceptance by the colonial intelligentsia. In any case, the latter was dominated by an upper caste elite drawing its own boundaries between the *sabhya* and the *a-sabhya*.[117] Any critique of state policy, so far, was premised upon an acceptance of the state's civilising claims, as when Anandaram Dhekial Phukan admonished the British in Assam for measures more suitable to the 'administration of an Asiatic Government rather than that of enlightened England'.[118]

It was around their respective visions of ordering nature that the American missionaries and their official patrons were to differ. Nathan Brown and his companions were all approval for the Company's goal of ordering Nature. But they saw their own contribution as limited to improving mind and soul, and it was this cerebral ideal which came to be at loggerheads with the responsibilities that the administration had in mind. It was gradually borne upon the Baptists that among 'the principal officers in Assam there are very few who have any higher idea of missions than as a means of civilisation'.[119] Civilisation, in this instance, bore a very earthly imprint, with the proposition that the mission should 'take up a quantity of land, on such terms as Government are willing to grant waste land, viz. rent free for fifteen or twenty years, for the sake of establishing a Christian colony, somewhat on the plan of the Moravians'.[120]

---

[116] Drayton, *Nature's Government*, p.80.
[117] An extensive discussion of this is in Chapters 4 and 5 of the dissertation.
[118] Mills, *Report*, Appendix J, Observations on the Administration of the Province of Assam by Baboo Anundaram Dakeal Phukan, p.94.
[119] Letter from Brown to Executive Committee, Sibsagar, 29 April, 1850. In Barpujari, *The American Missionaries*, p.93.
[120] Ibid.

In contrast, the only garden that the mission had the wherewithal and the intention to cultivate was that of the lord. Their favoured implement was not the plough, but the printing press, 'that instrument to which the nations of Europe are so greatly indebted for whatever superiority they enjoy over the ancient world'.[121] In this, they differed from this first generation of East India Company officials who saw the 'useful arts such as carpentry, husbandry etc' as being 'more useful pursuits than literature in a country where boats continue to be made from trunks of trees, the use of saw, a wheel-carriage or even a beast of burden is unknown, where half the surface of a rich soil capable of producing every article of tropical growth lies waste'.[122] As Brown belatedly realised

> [Captain Jenkins's] wish was to get missions who...would take up lands, carry on farming operations, and improve the province by civilisation and elevating the character of the people...This was his idea, for this he gave his money, and he expected that his recommendations would be attended ...Scarcely even a month passed that I did not receive several letters from him, and various schemes and plans, for agri-dyeing, calico-printing and the introduction of all kinds of mechanical arts.[123]

As the American Baptists became better acquainted with the region, their earlier plan for an all-encompassing Shan mission over Assam, Burma and China revealed itself to be entirely unworkable. Instead, they now decided to concentrate upon reaching out to native minds, through a new print culture of 'Christian devotion and modern information' within the region's own vernaculars. They were following what was by now a well trodden Protestant missionary path, whereby 'the best way to spread Christianity was not to seek a few converts who would be despised by their countrymen, but to preach rationally while diffusing sound knowledge, exciting a spirit of enlightened enquiry and throwing the masses into a state of fermentation'.[124] Such diffusion would be done by way of a periodical in the Assamese language, the Orunodoi, established 'to kindle and foster a spirit of inquiry...even when we are not

---

[121] Baptist Missionary Magazine, September 1846, p.290.
[122] Bengal Political Consultations, No. 51, 7 May 1830; Letter from Scott, 17 April 1830, NAI.
[123] Barpujari, *The American*, p.93; citing Brown to Executive Committee, Sibsagar, 29 April 1850; However, it needs to be kept in mind that Jenkins and other officials had provided invaluable help in various forms, such as the monthly grant of Rs 100 that Bronson's short lived venture among the Namsang Nagas had received. Another instance is that of Captain Hannay presenting his brick building at Sibsagar to set up the mission press. Upon other occasions in the future, the missionaries warmly expressed their gratitude for such patronage.
[124] William Adam, *Queries and Replies Respecting the Present State of the Protestant Missions in Bengal*, 1824.

able, as in the case of the present mission, to notice a large accession of converts, we are still certain that the elements of improvement are quietly and vigorously at work'.[125] Instead of promoting links with the territories beyond the frontiers of British India, these practices would contribute to the emergence of new notions of language, history and identity within Assam itself. However, another geographical and epistemological shift was yet in store for the mission, when the 'primitives' in the Naga, Garo and Lushai hills would ultimately prove more encouraging subjects for ministration than the inhabitants of the Assam valley.[126]

1 (6) Locating A Frontier

The documents of empire first characterised this region as the Northeast Frontier of its Bengal territory, and then of British India, a relational attribution carried over into independent India's nomenclature of it as the 'Northeast'. Imperial administrators generally agreed on the indefinite contours of this territory, revealed in this statement by Henry MacMahon, whose name would subsequently be immortalised upon its reaches.

> A frontier often has a wider and more general meaning than a boundary, and a frontier sometimes refers to a wide tract of border country, or to hinterlands and buffer states, undefined by any external boundary line. Such, until recent times, were the North-West frontier and the North-East Frontier of India; the one comprising the wide indefinite area of independent tribes on the Indian-Afghan border, the other a wide tract of a similarly indefinite nature on the Indian borders of Tibet and China.[127]

But what MacMahon failed here to convey was the contingent and temporal character of this 'indefinite' frontier, for it had steadily moved eastwards, as previously 'unadministered tracts' had arrived, for one reason or another, under British regulation. The frontier continued to remain undefined for a considerable time - indeed, in some respects it has remained so down to the present day. The 'mapping of empire' proceeded fairly speedily for those territories which fitted conveniently into the imperial agenda of extraction. Those which did not, for one reason or another,

---

[125] Baptist Missionary Magazine, September 1846, p.290.
[126] Chapters 3 and 4 of the dissertation elaborate on this theme.
[127] A. Henry MacMahon, "International Boundaries," in Journal of the Royal Society of Arts, Vol. 84, 1935; cited by Ainslie T. Embree, "Frontiers into Boundaries: From the Traditional to the Modern State," in Richard G. Fox ed., *Realm and Region in Traditional India*, New Delhi, 1977, p.260.

would be incorporated into one or other of the systems of indirect rule that Empire was evolving.

At the commencement of the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1824, the Bengal civilian David Scott wielded a dual responsibility as the Collector of the border district of Rangpur and the Agent to the Governor-General on the Northeast frontier of Bengal. It was in pursuance of these duties that he was put in charge of the kingdom of Assam after its 'recovery' from the short-lived Burmese occupation. By the early nineteenth century, Assam had passed through a series of encounters between local factions, mercenaries from Eastern India, invaders from the outlying Shan chiefdoms, and the forces of the East India Company. It was its strategic location on Bengal's eastern flanks and the dangers posed by the Burmese annexation, rather than any intrinsic attraction that the region itself held, which finally propelled the Company's annexation.[128] As a later historian observed, the territorial acquisitions which it was deemed advisable to extract from Ava were 'of little value to either state'.[129] While this initial conquest might be seen in terms of P.J. Marshall's theory that Company expansion took place in a piecemeal and haphazard manner, driven on by short-term opportunism of the men on the spot, further territorial extension certainly happened in tandem with the new optimism for Assam's agricultural prospects.[130]

Initially, it had seemed that the British would keep Lower Assam, the territory adjoining Bengal, in their own hands, while entrusting the wilder reaches towards the east into suitably docile native hands. But by 1835, Major Francis Jenkins, the first of a long series of military administrators, was forcefully opposing Scott's installation of Purandar Singha over Upper Assam, just discovered as the home of the local tea plant. Soon, Purandar and other local chiefs were ousted in favour of the Assam Company's 'conversion of uninhabited jungles to a smiling cultivation'.[131] They were no match for this ideology of redemption for a new Eden, the cornucopia of arable riches that Assam appeared to be. Soon, The Times would perceptively observe,

---

[128] See Ravi Ahuja, "'Captain Kittoe's Road'" for a similar analysis.
[129] Wilson, *History*, p.111.
[130] Marshall, *Trade and Conquest*.
[131] Mills, *Report*, Appendix E, Petition to the Governor-General of India from the Directors of the Assam Company, p.80.

> Some years ago it was our policy to avoid the hills, and to shun any accession of territory among them. We therefore...sought out distant relatives and placed them on the guddees of their little principalities. Now our policy is altered...There is a daydream of colonisation and tea planting in the minds of some of our people and we wish to define our frontier.[132]

In 1858, H.H. Wilson's History delivered a similar verdict upon the Assam lands.

> In an economical point of view...these territories...are in a state of progress to still greater improvement; while they have a real political value in constituting a difficult and well defined frontier, presenting a ready access to Ava and Siam, and promising at some future period convenient intercourse by land with the opulent empire of China. The civilisation of the barbarous tribes which occupy the intervening space, may also be contemplated as a certain although distant result.[133]

Despite such pious hopes, an important consideration for the East India Company in this prospective agenda for civilisation was that it should not require too great an expenditure, either of money or expertise. The direct revenue-generating possibilities of the Assam tracts were rated very low, inhabited as they were by people whose acquaintance with a market economy was deemed to be of the slightest. With its genesis in the Regulation X passed by the GOC-in-Council in 1822, the Non-Regulation system of administration was specifically created for such a 'rude and simple state of society', with responsibility vested in district officers largely unfettered by the rule of law.[134] While the official chronicler Alexander Mackenzie saw them as an amazing body of men for whom 'no peak is inaccessible, no jungle impenetrable and no tribe too rude to be faced,' an administration run by these military officers encountered scathing criticism from the Indian vernacular press. Bengali papers, in particular, mocked the mooted separation of Assam from the Bengal Presidency as stemming from a desire to perpetuate a 'practically absolute' regime, for official and planter alike. In 1877, the Bharat Sangskarak was not alone in

---

[132] The Times, 9 November 1858, London.
[133] Wilson, *History*, p.112
[134] The Non-Regulation System devised in the early nineteenth century comprised of arrangements under which people in newly annexed territories inhabited by 'aboriginal tribes' were to be governed directly by British officers, usually military men of superior rank, and be exempt from the general regulations for the rest of British India. The northeast frontier of the Bengal district of Rangpur, Assam, Arakan, Tenasserim, the southwest frontier tracts and tributary mahals of Orissa and later, the districts of Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and the hill tracts of Chittagong were all brought under the system. From Misra, *The Unification*, p.224.

its jaundiced view that under the Non-Regulation system, the 'powerful commercial lobby' in Assam would have things very much its own way as

> It is well known, that in such provinces, the administration of justice is not quite pure. The case would have been otherwise if it had continued to form part of Bengal, as the judicial officers then would have had to proceed according to law, and might at times punish offending planters.[135]

Such sentiments emerged in response to the first major administrative reshuffling for the region, in 1874, when Assam was formed into a Chief Commissionership comprising the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Cachar and the Garo hills, parts of the Naga hills and Sylhet. In 1872, the first census report had described Assam as

> A cul-de-sac...a long valley say of some four hundred miles, hemmed in on either side and at one end by mountain barriers which are well nigh impassable and having a mighty river running through it. The authority of the British government makes itself felt in this region over an area of perhaps 30,000 square miles and a population including a host of savage tribes in a low stage of civilisation of 1,500,000 which gives fifty souls to the square mile, while the revenue may be put down at about Rs 100 to the square mile.[136]

Almost half a century after the treaty of Yandaboo, British India's Northeast frontier had moved considerably, expanding from the Ahom and Matak territories in Upper Assam into previously unknown hilly tracts to its east and south. By the end of the nineteenth century, additional territories inhabited by the Lhota, Angami, Ao and Lushai were being incorporated through a series of 'pacifying' expeditions. Assam's neighbours Tibet and China were also providing significant determinants of policy along this frontier.

However, territorial extension went hand in hand with a constant bemoaning of the region's 'revenue-deficit' status. The tea economy was still stabilising after the depression of the 1860s and the largely subsistence-based peasant economy was highly unsatisfactory from the official perspective. Some part of Lord Curzon's resolve to partition Bengal by joining its eastern districts to Assam in 1905 certainly

---

[135] Bharat Sangskarak, 22 January 1877; RNP, 1877.
[136] H.N. Beverley, *Report on the Census of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1872, p.45.

emerged from the desire to bring a region that was 'still very largely jungle' into the embrace of a territory with an abundance of settled agricultural experience, to the benefit of both. However, the dominant role envisaged for the latter was clear enough from the fact that the new province was initially titled only as 'Eastern Bengal', with the suffix 'and Assam' a last minute addition, introduced at the tea lobby's insistence to maintain its commercial interests.

A large part of the British disdain for their predecessors had stemmed from their perception that the Assam valley was 'surrounded north, east and south by numerous, savage and warlike tribes whom the decaying authority of the Assam dynasty had failed of late years to control, and whom the disturbed condition of the province had incited to encroachment'.[137] This sweeping judgement was based upon a fundamental misunderstanding of local authority and identity structures. In contrast to the British premium upon 'control' and 'encroachment' in relation to fixed landed parameters, the precolonial states in the Brahmaputra valley, the Kachari, Koch and Ahom, practised a much looser pattern of exchange systems and interactions with groups on their peripheries, such as the Naga. These were complex relationships which ran the gamut of barter, trade, gift and tribute ties. As Edmund Leach has suggested, human beings not separated by major geographical barriers were likely to have relations with each other, and 'so far as these relations are ordered and not wholly haphazard there is implicit in them a social structure. We have to view cultural differences as likely to be structurally different but not as necessarily indicating that the differing groups belonged to distinct social systems'.[138] British administrators would regard the notion of a social structure as inherent in such relations in a singularly jaundiced manner. Instead, they would identify its components, such as the posa payments by Assam plains villagers as akin to 'the Chouth of the Mahrattas and blackmail of the ancient Highlanders'.[139] Conflating the Assam hill groups within such a historical typology of 'marauders' made its necessary riposte a policy of segregation and containment.[140] The 'indefinite nature of the connection subsisting between the Assam sovereigns and

---

[137] Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the Northeast Frontier of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1884, p.7.
[138] Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, London, 1954 (reprint 2001), p.17.
[139] Mills, *Report*, Letter No. 3 of 1844 from Captain J.T. Gordon to Major Jenkins, p.169.
[140] Ibid.

their savage neighbours' now provided a rationale for colonial measures promoting a strict boundary between the former's plains, and the latter's hills.[141]

Such a policy of spatial segregation was shored up ideologically by the ethnographic imagining of South Asian people that was simultaneously underway. By the late nineteenth century, seizing upon and magnifying differences among different categories among their subjects, an exhaustive list of the 'tribes' of India was in preparation. What appeared as the 'heterogenous' ethnic situation in Assam provided an array of additions to this list. This was part of the processes by which British colonial administration ordered and separated groups into tribes and castes within a discursive framework built around ideas about savages and primitives, and about hunting, pastoralism, agriculture and commerce.[142] Societies were ranked in relation to each other, situated above all in relation to time, or more specifically, in relation to the modern time epitomised by Europe. The specific time that societies occupied, the question of how 'advanced' they were, was measured by various criteria, ranging from technology, habitat, modes of subsistence, climatic variations or racial types.[143]

It is in this light that we need to place the enactment of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 - the inauguration of a new frontier policy upon this periphery of empire. It allowed the colonial state to create an Inner Line along the foothill tracts, whereby the inhabitants of the tracts beyond would 'manage their own affairs with only such interference on the part of the frontier officers in their political capacity as may be considered advisable with the view to establishing a personal influence for good among the chiefs and the tribes'.[144] This regulation, specifically legislated for this Northeastern frontier of British India, was to be the main vehicle to administer it. It would be buttressed by the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874 and the Frontier Tract Regulation Act of 1880 which permitted the exclusion of the territories under their purview from the codes of civil and criminal procedures, the rules on property legislation and transfer and any other laws considered unsuitable for them. Ostensibly

---

[141] A. Mackenzie, *History of the Relations*, p.7.
[142] Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India: 1200-1991*, Cambridge, 1999.
[143] Ajay Skaria, "Shades of Wildness: Tribe, Caste and Gender in Western India", The Journal of Asian Studies, 56 (3), August 1997, pp.726-45.
[144] A. Mackenzie, *History of the Relations*, pp.89-90.

framed to control 'the commercial relations of our own subjects with the frontier tribes', such measures instituted what Sanjib Baruah calls the move from 'soft to hard boundaries', creating excluded areas where no British subject or foreign citizen could venture without permission.[145]

Unlike the Assam Valley, whose population was seen as docile and indolent in equal measures, the 'savages' of the new hilly tracts seemed palpably ungovernable even by the latitude that the Non-Regulation system provided. Financial considerations added a strong argument in favour of the limited administrative investment that indirect rule permitted. With it, the British planter lost his entrée into those tracts, as did the inhabitant of the plains, with the result that the Northeast Frontier was to proceed along a trajectory of fatherly official and missionary remit. By the early twentieth century, once the region was seen as safely 'pacified', the characterisation of the inhabitants of its hills shifted somewhat, with an official ideology of 'noble savage' modifying previously held negative connotations. A paternalistic regime emerged in these Excluded Districts where the British administration possessed a tremendous range of discretionary powers in order to preserve and protect the timeless systems that colonial ethnography was discovering for these 'hill tribes'. A piquant situation emerged whereby the Assam plains were viewed, by both nationalist and colonial ideologues, as an extension of a larger Indic schema, while its neighbouring hills remained external to that, with their kinship to the Southeast Asian peripheries beyond.

1 (7) Settling a Frontier

The incorporation of this borderland into the British empire involved not just its shifting contours as a land frontier, but also a trajectory of people movements in and out of it. These need to be explored in terms of their interactions with both its political economy and cultural systems. The precolonial use of the label *Bangal* for the denizens of the indeterminate space beyond Assam's western limits points to a conceptual differentiation between the homeland and the Indic lands, which acquired

[145] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Pennsylvania, 1999, p.31.

force in the medieval period, retaining its sway well into the nineteenth century.[146] Bengal emerged as a symbolic as well as actual space, through which streams of people and cultures made their way into Assam. In the colonial period, the cultural impact of the assimilation of Assam into British India, and the increased contact that its inhabitants had with other regional groups meant that their connections with the Indic world began to outstrip any other. While Assam had, through the centuries, served as an intersection between the Indic and Sinic worlds on either side, the colonial annexation brought the former centrally to the forefront. This is not to gainsay an earlier repertoire of Sanskritised cultural and political ingredients that had made its way into the Brahmaputra valley, but only to recognise its cohabitation and partial overlapping with other patterns.

Despite their adoption of Sanskritic motifs, the Ahom rulers of Assam had never quite lost sight of the cultural motifs they traced to a legendary Tai homeland. The depiction of the *Swargadeo* as a descendant of Indra emphasised identification with this Southeast Asian node, coexisting with the kinship claimed with the 'Nara kings' of the Shan lands. In the early nineteenth century, the reduction of the Ahom kings by combined levies of Shan, Singpho and Burmese troops and their carrying away of thousands of captives were a late eruption in a long history of population movements across this borderland. It was this phenomenon that colonial ethnography tried to explain in terms of gigantic race movements of 'original' tribes such as the Bodo into Assam, from unspecified Chinese territory. Such theories seemed to receive credence from assertions by high-caste Hindus, Muslim and Sikh groups in Assam of migration from an Indic heartland. These myths of origin were of a quite different order from those prevalent among the region's hill dwellers, which tended to stress their relationship to their specific ecological niche rather than the concerns with ritual status and territorial affiliation which their neighbours displayed.[147] By the late

---

[146] 'Apart from the people of our own desh and the people of the hill jatis, everyone else is a Bongal. The very word denotes an inauspicious and unholy jati.' Cited from R.M., "Bongal", Gunabhiram Barua ed., Assam Bandhu, Vol. 3, Calcutta, 1885.

[147] A good instance comes from an Apatani myth of their origins. At first Kujum-Chandu, the earth, was like a human being; she had a head and arms and legs, and an enormous fat belly. The original human beings lived on the surface of her body. One day it occurred to her that if she ever got up and walked about, everyone would fall off and be killed; so she herself died of her own accord. Her head became the snow covered mountains, the bones of her back turned into smaller hills. Her chest was the valley where Apatanis live. From her neck came the north country of the Tagins. Her buttocks turned into Assam which has fat rich soil. Cited by Verrier Elwin, *Myths of the Northeast Frontier of India*, Shillong, 1968.

nineteenth century, a theory of a racial differentiation between Aryan and non-Aryan was being deployed to create a rigid boundary between 'caste' and 'tribe' populations, with the former seen as latecomers from 'Aryavarta' among an autochthonous 'Mongoloid' race of the latter.[148]

Harkening back to the appellation of Bangal as an index of externality, what it allows us to access is a notion of precolonial territoriality tied to that of community. This is compatible with the work of premodern historians such as Romila Thapar and Hermann Kulke who have advanced theories linking the early growth of the state in India to the emergence of a sense of territoriality at different levels, from the locality to the wider region.[149] Often, such territoriality was defined through its interactions with external forces, rather than through rigid spatial or ethnic parameters. The homeland was not specifically mapped out in terms of its spatial boundaries, except for certain mythic parameters, usually more notional than otherwise, like the river Karatoya between Bengal and Assam. For the inhabitant of Assam, Bangals comprised an indeterminate Other, external to the homeland, which explained why even the British were initially known as boga ('white') Bangals. It is surely significant that this category appears for the first time in the medieval buranji literature narrating the military conflicts of the Assam kings with the Sultanate of Bengal.

Such Othering could work the other way too, as when contemporary Muslim chroniclers, at the time of these Indo-Turkish encounters, perceived northern Bengal generally, and especially Kamrup, lying between the Brahmaputra river and the Bhutan hills, as a fabulous and mysterious place inhabited by practitioners of the occult, of yoga and of magic. The Ain-i-akbari in 1595 described Kamrup's inhabitants as being addicted to jadugari ('magic'). In 1662-63, Shihab al-din Talib remarked in the Fathiyah-i-ibriyah that the people of India look upon the Assamese as sorcerers, and used 'Assam' in formulas to dispel witchcraft.[150] However, this textual knowledge did manage to plot a shift within the region's own categories of self, from Puranic Kamrup to Ahom Assam. Richard Eaton points to how this outlying

---

[148] See *Report on the Census of India for 1881*, Calcutta, 1883, pp.63-107.
[149] See Romila Thapar, *Clan, Caste and Origin Myths in Early India*, Shimla 1992 and Hermann Kulke, *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia*, New Delhi, 1993.

periphery was sought to be incorporated into the Indo-Persian world, with a Brahminic worldview being initially deployed by the Koch kings, and then, more successfully, by the Ahoms, as a device for its contestation.[151] Despite the Hussain Shahi domination of Koch Bihar and Kamrup from 1494 until 1533, the Bengal conquerors were ultimately forced to withdraw by the Ahoms, whose authority now extended from the *ujani* ('upper') Assam territory to the land of Kamakhya - Kamrup, or *namoni* ('lower') Assam. While political incorporation into the Indic heartland awaited the British advent, there was a long and gradual permeation of its courtly and administrative styles, evident in modes ranging from the Assam peasantry being grouped into *khels* to the adoption of Mughal-fashioned robes, within this frontier's idioms of rule.

At the same time, there is plentiful evidence of the steady influx of occupational groups from Bengal and North India, ranging from ritual to craft specialists, often at the direct behest of the Ahom kings. C.A. Bayly and others have pointed to the importance of the service and military economy in North and Eastern India for people movements in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[152] The long years of Mughal military pressure caused the Ahoms to try to control entry into their realm,[153] but there was still considerable interaction with trans-Indian networks of service and patronage. Haliram Dhekial Phukan's adoptive father, who obtained the post of Duwariya Barua, was an itinerant sanyasi from South India whose learning helped him to advance rapidly at Gaurinath Singha's court. Again, 'thousands of Hindustanee and Sikh Fuqeers,'[154] the *barkandazes* hired by local chieftains settled down in Lower Assam in the eighteenth century. While such migrants came into Assam identified as Bangals, they rapidly lost that ascription once they entered this space. A vestige of this externality could remain, could even be sought after as a marker of difference, real or fictive, as with Goriyas, Muslims claiming ancestry from Gaur, or Brahmins tracing roots to Kanauj. On the whole, such precolonial ethnicities, compounded as

---

[150] Cited by Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760*, Berkeley, 1993, pp.187-91.
[151] Ibid, *The Rise of Islam*, p.77.
[152] C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870*, Cambridge, 1996 and Dirk H.A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethno-History of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850*, Cambridge, 1990.
[153] Buckingham, *An Account of the Burman Empire*, pp. 97-8. Also see S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations*.
[154] Mills, *Report*, Appendix B, Letter from Jenkins to Mills, p.57.

they were out of 'a sense of regional interest and its embodiment in forms of local religion and tradition', could absorb themselves into different milieux, investing in new 'local patriotisms' and ways of identification, sometimes very quickly. As Bayly avers, 'such patriotisms could be constantly reinvented as assumed ethnicities rather than taking ethnicity itself as the basis of identity'.[155]

Sudipta Kaviraj has termed these precolonial conceptions of community as 'fuzzy' and counterposed them to the 'enumerated' type which was born from the marriage of colonialism and modernity. He sees community as a notion which is necessarily predicated on some conception of difference. People handled their daily experience of social complexity through some system of rules by which people could be classified as similar or different and dealt with accordingly.[156] But premodern classifications of the kind we have examined represented relative distance rather than a permanent essence, and could also be acquired, or even, dispensed with. This is clearly evident with regard to internal differentiation of categories within Assam itself. For instance, the labels of 'Naga' or 'Abor' was bestowed by the Ahom buranjis upon those groups they regarded as a-sabhya, but such an identification was contingent upon their habitat and way of life, not as permanent unchanging condition. As early colonial administrators noted, Abor, signifying barbarous, rude, independent, was applied very indefinitely to independent hill clans on both sides of the valley.[157] While this label served as shorthand for those groups at the furthest distance from the authority and influence of the Ahom regime, that of Naga was allotted to those hill dwellers who inhabited its peripheries and existed within a complex intermeshing of exchanges.

Such terms of indigenous alterity were fairly amorphous, as Edward Dalton was to find, with 'a Naga in the middle of the Naga hills' apt to 'point out some distant and unknown village or country as inhabited by Abors.'[158] Rather than a rigid compartmentalisation, an intricate net of relationships and perceptions made up the fabric of interaction between the people of the plains and the hills. In an Angami tale, their ancestor had three sons. An old man asked them what they would do for a living.

---

[155] C.A. Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia*, Delhi, 1998, p.11.
[156] Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India," in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey ed., *Subaltern Studies VII*, Delhi, 1992, pp.1-39.
[157] G.W. Beresford, "Notes on the Northeast Frontier of Assam, 1881," reprinted in Elwin ed., *India's Northeast Frontier*, p.284.

The eldest decided to till the soil, the second to be a writer, the youngest to be a hunter. From the tiller of the soil were born the Naga, the hunter disappeared into the forest and the writer became the ancestor of the Assamese.[159] In such borderlands, the overlapping frontiers of ecology and migration were the determinants shaping the multiple and contextually shifting contours adopted by the referents of social identity.

However, by the late nineteenth century, racial, economic and political boundaries became sufficiently rigid to reify the dichotomy between the hills and plains, an accepted necessity for their inhabitants as for their colonial administrators. The most definite political form this took was that of the Inner Line Restrictions, cordoning the hill areas in Assam off from the plains.[160] While British rule was producing an escalated rhetoric of the Naga as marauding hillmen responsible for bloody raids into the plains, this still coexisted with remnants of an older economy where 'in the dry season, Naga villagers would come to neighbouring Assamese ones to buy chickens, *eri* and muga silk. In exchange for salt, they would chop wood and cut down trees.'[161] Paradoxically, as an influential section of colonial opinion, in the wake of Naga 'pacification' started shifting to an anthropologically romantic notion of noble hillmen with their own form of rudimentary democracy, the dominant Assamese discourse was hardening in its ascription of civilisational and racial externality for the Naga, and other tribal people. With colonial modernity accompanied by new categories of self and community identification, identifying Assamese would be a complex undertaking.

1 (8) The marriage of commerce and culture

An important theme in the dissertation will be the exploration of an intelligentsia establishing markers for an Assamese identity and reorienting itself in relation to the new patterns of migration and economic activity in Assam. From its inception, the colonial regime had made no secret of its desire to bring industrious settlers to open up this frontier land, though initially doubting its success. In 1853, a district official lamented

---

[158] "Report on Captain Dalton's visit to Membu," 1855, reprinted in Ibid, p.249.
[159] Prafulladatta Goswami, *Tribal Folk-Tales of Assam*, Guwahati, 1955, p.183.
[160] Measures such as the Inner Line Regulations of 1873 have been retained in postcolonial India, and in fact are as strongly defended by indigenous people as by the state institutions which perpetuate them.
[161] Jogeswar Sarma ed., *Benudhar Sarmar Rasanavali*: Vol. 1: *Mojiyar Pora Mejoloi*, Guwahati, 1985, p.21.

> The population increases very slowly indeed, on account of the excessive mortality that takes place annually from cholera and smallpox. It is never increased by foreign settlers. Neither Bengallees nor Hindostanees can be induced to settle in Assam for fear of those and other diseases, although the utmost encouragement has been given to them and others to do so, since the Province has been in our possession.[162]

But within a few years, the census reports were reporting a growing number of people in the province whose place of birth was outside it.[163] The changing contours of Assam's political economy were operating to insert varied groups of Dhangar, Keya, Sylhetti, Mymensinghia, Bihari and Nepali into its different niches.

Until the turn of the twentieth century, most vernacular publicists viewed this process in a fairly positive light. In the periodical Assam Bandhu, A.B.'s essay on "Aamar Manuh" ('Our people') welcomed the influx of settlers as a contribution to the unnati the intelligentsia were hoping to achieve. Since, with the 'wondrous shortening of time, it now takes only about ten days to journey from one end of the country to another', 'people are arriving in waves from outside. The better for us the more chances for people from outside to enter our country. The better the more chances our people get to go outside'.[164] Another publicist, Bolinarayan Bora (1852-1927) saw the cultivation of Assam as providing succour to people from other lands, as well as advancement for its own economy.

> Those who would have starved to death in the land of the Bangals, they have been given a living by bringing them onto the gardens in Assam, and through those wages, they have been made into men. Through them the jungles of Assam are being opened up into cultivated fields, and Garowan, Dhoba, Metor, Mithaiwala, Mussiyar etc all those ordinary occupations which were scarce in Assam, have begun to fill up.[165]

Both colonial and indigenous writers took to emphasising the virtual absence of trade and commerce in precolonial Assam, the veritable embodiment, it would seem, of an autarchic economy. This tended to obscure local institutions of exchange such as *haats* and fairs. For instance, near Nagaon,

---

[162] Mills, *Report*, Letter from Captain Vetch to Jenkins, p.76.
[163] See the census reports on Assam from 1881 onwards.
[164] A.M., "Aamar Manuh," Gunabhiram Barua ed., Assam Bandhu, Vol. 4, 1886.
[165] Bolinarayan Bora, "Assamiya aru Bongali," Haranarayan Bora ed. Mau or The Bee, January 1887.

> A large number of people were assembling for a fair which is held there weekly. Rice and other necessaries, cloths, hoes, axes, dahs and a variety of useful articles were exposed for sale. Assamese, Lalung, Mikirs and Garo amounting two to three thousand were here collected together purchasing their weekly supplies.[166]

In the absence of the qasbah of North India, Captain Jenkins could depict precolonial Assam as 'labouring under the disadvantage of being beyond all trade, having no connexion with any other Province of the Empire, and only savages as its neighbours'.[167] This provided a clear contrast to the changed situation under the British, where 'the trade of the country has very greatly increased, and though its management has been most unprofitable to its own population, yet through it the Assamese are now daily commanding an increase of foreign luxuries, and they have an abundance of all the necessaries of life'.[168]

It was a migrant people, the Marwari, who played an essential role for such patterns of distribution and consumption, through their interactions with the colonial economic structures entering Assam. For centuries, the Marwari, from their homelands in Rajasthan, had participated in the long-range trade and high finance surrounding Mughal rule. Gradually, several semi-permanent settlements had emerged, one of the earliest being the Oswals around the famous Jagat Seths at Murshidabad, many of them acquiring large landholdings. This virtual assimilation into landed gentry, though alongside continued involvement in banking and trade, and their physical distance from the later settlers in Calcutta, meant that the Murshidabad Oswals remained more or less distinct from the larger Marwari community.[169] A similar dichotomy can be discerned within the migrants to Assam. While the majority of these *Keyas*, as they were locally known, retained familial and business ties across generations with their counterparts elsewhere on the subcontinent, a small minority were becoming more or less assimilated into local networks, while retaining a general affiliation with commercial activity. The career of Navrangram Agarwala allows us to

---

[166] Account by Oliver T. Cutter, Feb 12, 1842. In Barpujari, *The American Missionaries*, p.80.
[167] Mills, *Report*, Appendix B, From Jenkins to Mills, p.60.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Thomas A. Timberg, *The Marwaris: From Traders to Industrialists*, New Delhi 1978, pp.41-2. The term 'keya' could have been derived from a Murshidabad link for the Marwaris traders who first interacted with Assam, as there are eighteenth century references 'coyer' grain merchants in that town. See Bengal Board of Revenue Proceedings, P/70/35, 12 June 1787, 27 November 1787, 11 December 1787, 5 October 1787, OIOC. I owe this information to Tilottama Mukherjee.

see how it was possible for such a Keya to become Assamese, within the particular circumstances of colonial modernity's transmutations of ascribed ethnicity into regional identity.

While the first few Marwari traders arrived alongside the British from their previous base at Goalpara, the majority, like other migrant groups into the province, came in only after the establishment of a rail network in the 1870s and 1880s.[170] The usual pattern was for young male migrants to join an established Marwari firm as clerks and later set up independent ventures. In 1829, a young man from the town of Churu in Bikaner, Navrangram Agarwala joined the firm of Ramdayal Poddar at Goalpara. He was subsequently deputed to a new Lower Assam branch, but soon launched out on his own. At the military outpost of Biswanath, he took up ventures ranging from selling elephants, rubber, cane, mustard seed and rice, to supplying military rations, to collecting revenue as a local *mouzadar*. Apparently, the local notable Maniram Barbhandar Barua got him this first revenue post, but it was the British Magistrate of Darrang, Captain Vetch who gave him additional responsibility as the mouzadar of the villages of Gamiri, Rangchali and Bengabari. When Navrangram proved his worth by successfully mediating between the British and the local Dafla tribals, his authority was extended over the entire Kolongpur area.[171]

The greatest impetus to Marwari out-migration was involvement in the commercial networks around primary commodities that British rule encouraged. All the way from Central India to Bihar and Assam, the Marwaris were becoming indispensable as moneylenders and merchants. In north Bengal and Assam, in the absence of significant local competition, they assumed a virtual monopoly over the export and import of almost all such commodities, with the notable exception of tea.[172] As Mills noted in the 1850s, the entire supply of salt was in the hands of 'the Marwarree merchants, who are located at the several Sudder stations and principal marts in the

---

[170] Gunabhiram Barua in his biographical account of the Dhekial Phukan family who were the last holders of the post of Duwariya Barua or the 'farm' of the Hadira Chowky trading post on the Goalpara border describes how they had considerable interaction in the 1820s with both the local Marwaris with 'golas' at Goalpara but also with their Murshidabad contacts, including the Jagat Seth. *Anandaram Dhekial Phukanar Jivan Charitra*, Calcutta, 1880, p.14.
[171] Iswar Prasad Choudhury, *Jyotiprasad Agarwala*, New Delhi, 1986, pp.2-3.
[172] Timberg, *The Marwaris*, p.43.

interior'.[173] Another official report was to remark, 'the enterprise and endurance of the Marwaris is surprising. They live the whole year round in miserable houses, sometimes in mostly unhealthy situations and slowly store what they collect from the hill tribes and country produce for export'.[174] Until the prohibition of opium cultivation in 1861, distributing the locally produced opium was the most lucrative enterprise for the Assam Keya, facilitated by his contacts with the opium networks in regions such as Malwa. The cash he advanced against the opium grown by the local peasant was essential in easing the latter's transition into the new revenue economy. Since rice cultivation was largely on a subsistence basis well into the end of the century, it was cash crops such as mustard, cotton, pulses and opium, and at a later stage, jute which the Keya was buying from the local peasant. Another migrant trading group involved in this trade was the Bepari, Muslim traders from East Bengal – whose base for operations tended to be the district towns.[175]

In the 1840s, Navrangam had arrived in Assam with his widowed mother, and was subsequently joined by various brothers and cousins in his business. It was his two successive marriages to Sadari and Sonpahi, women from well-connected gentry families, and his initiation by a Vaishnavite Gosain which entered him into the ranks of local respectability.[176] Indeed, "Aamar Manuh" would offer its own interpretation of the porous character of Assam's boundaries, that 'since the marriage rules are lax in our country, bideshi people find it easy to settle...Our people generally do not mind marrying their daughters to men from outside. Often, it is seen that *jati* and kul are disregarded'.[177] Thus, marriage and a *Gosain*'s blessing had brought this particular Keya into the Kalita caste, an upwardly mobile cluster of peasant jatis using the respectable status and high rank that many members had acquired during the later Ahom years to claim the position just after the Brahmin in the varna hierarchy. However, as a first-generation migrant, Navrangam retained close links with the trans-local Marwari networks, particularly with his kin among the prominent Mahasingh Meghraj family of Calcutta. Symbolically, his death rites were

---

[173] Mills, *Report*, p.29.
[174] *Assam Administrative Report,* 1880-1, Shillong 1882, p.15 and *Assam Administrative Report,* 1881-2, Shillong 1883, p.14.
[175] *Report of Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee*, 1929-30, Government of India, 1930.
[176] Choudhury, *Jyotiprasad*, pp.1-3.
[177] A.B, "Aamar Manuh," Gunabhiram Barua ed., Assam Bandhu, Vol. 4, 1886.

performed twice, first at Calcutta in the Marwari manner and then at his own Kolongpur home, by an Assamese Brahmin.

It was from the lifetime of Navrangam's son, Haribilas (1842-1916) that family tradition dates the discarding of Keya status for that of 'Assamese'. For instance, while Haribilas followed his father into Vaishnavite devotionalism, he went a significant step further, by discarding Marwari dietary practice in favour of the local fish-consuming culture.[178] But an interesting dissonance appeared between public presentation and private practice whereby Haribilas acquired kudos as the region's foremost 'cultural entrepreneur' by sponsoring the first printed version of the Assamese scriptures while continuing to use the Nagri script in his business, rather than the newly standardised Assamese. The career of this Assamese 'saudagar' provides an important insight into the changing patterns of political economy and social practices in the region.[179] As this dissertation will subsequently trace, Haribilas' shift from the distribution of opium to the production of tea was symptomatic of a larger cultural phenomenon, integrally linked to Assam's integration as a province of Britain's Indian empire.

It is difficult to say with any degree of certainty whether many Marwari migrants followed Navrangram and his son Haribilas into the arena of land revenue collection, in combination with their trading activity. The lack of 'historical gossip'[180] about the Keya in this role would seem to argue against it. With the establishment of British rule, districts were divided into mahals with annual revenue settlements for each. This entailed arrangements for collecting revenue 'through Chowdrees, Mouzahdars, Bissoas, and Patgharries, as they were variously named. The divisions were of all sizes, the object being in view to provide employment for the better class of Assamese.'[181] In a similar vein, Captain Brodie cited 'respectability of character' as the chief criteria for mouzadars in Sibsagar after the district was taken back from Purandar Singha in 1838.[182] A mouzadari represented an axis of power and respectability which explains why Haribilas held on to his office, as did other tea

---

[178] This is a personal communication from the family of his brother, Hridayanath Agarwala, Delhi, 2000.
[179] A description conferred by Padmadhar Gohain Barua, *Mor Sowaroni*, Guwahati, 1968, p.20.
[180] See Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, London, 1985.
[181] Mills, *Report*, p.2.

planters such as Siva Prasad Barua, despite its meagre returns compared to their commercial ventures.[183]

British rule had brought in its wake not only such trading and artisan groups, but large numbers of service gentry from other parts of the Bengal Presidency. It was the rapid rise of this 'Bengali *amla*' which accounted for the changing rhetoric among the Assamese publicists, with increasing competition for clerical jobs. This antagonism grew particularly acute from the later part of the nineteenth century, when diminishing colonial openings accompanied increased education among young Indians. Such jostling for loaves and fishes was often expressed in stereotypes, representing a reconfiguration of precolonial Othering with new racial notions. A good example comes from the way in which Lord Curzon's resolve to partition Bengal and join its eastern districts to Assam drew howls of protest from the population of East Bengal who vociferously protested at the awful fate that awaited them, of being classed with Assamese, synonymous for them with 'lawless barbarians from the hills'.[184] Despite such protests, and the revocation of the Partition in 1912, a steady stream of service groups continued to enter the Assam valley from all the Bengal districts, helped along by their earlier assimilation into colonial educational and administrative mores. This was to bring about a paradoxical situation where the Sylhetti clerk, whose own Bengali-ness was contested by the Calcutta bhadralok, came to exemplify Bengali internal colonisation for the 'authentic' Assamese.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to depict the forces of an emerging imperial state creating a new British Indian province of Assam out of previous borderlands sited along an Indo-Sinic periphery. The revolution in commodity demand which was transforming the global economy in the nineteenth century necessitated massive changes in land

---

[182] Ibid, *Report*, On Sibsagar District, p.505.
[183] Rajen Saikia, *Social and Economic History of Assam*, Delhi, 2001, p.94. In 1881, there were 200 mouzadars with commissions of Rs 50 or more, and another 100 or so who received between Rs 50 and Rs 20, and 57 who received less than Rs 20.
[184] Home Public Proceedings 'A', No. 532 of September 1873 and No. 258 of September 1874, NAI; Memorials with over two thousand signatures dispatched by the Sylhet People's Association to the Lt. Governor of Bengal against separating them from Bengal.

use, and an extension of the agricultural frontier of empire. The chapter has gone on to trace how this little known region was viewed in relation to other parts of India and throw light on the institutional processes transforming other peripheries such as Sind, Ceylon and Burma into appendages of such an imperial formation. It explores the differentiated ways in which the colonial state viewed the various groups of people and the ecological niches within a province whose borders continued to be in a situation of flux.

It advances the thesis that cultural annexation into British India proceeded relatively smoothly in the Assam valley, as compared to those other frontiers, partly due to the 'Sanskritisation' that its elites had undergone by the eighteenth century.[185] In addition, the influx of large groups of people from other regions in the wake of the colonial state served to further socialise local elites into an ideology of economic progress and Indic acculturation. By the second half of the nineteenth century, a new tea sector was already fuelling idyllic fantasies of progress among colonial and indigenous entrepreneurs. The cultural flux between jungle and garden, between incomer and migrant, between hills and plains provided the canvas upon which the shifting contours of the political economy and the ideologies of race, class and gender worked out their meanings.

[185] M.N. Srinivas, *The Cohesive Role of Sanskritisation and Other Essays*, New Delhi, 1989. While the outline of this concept has been extensively, and rightly criticised, it still serves as a convenient term to sum up such processes of cultural mobility.

II The Progress of Colonialism: Lazy Natives, Coolies and Babus

Introduction

This chapter examines the role of two globally exchanged commodities, tea and opium, in assimilating Assam into a capitalist world-system of labour and commodity flows. Tea production was an innovation introduced shortly after British incorporation, serving as the entry point for a new system, that of the plantation. By the mid-nineteenth century, British, French and Dutch colonies all over Asia were dominated by this plantation system - 'production on a large scale with a division of labour and financial arrangements which are typical of industry rather than agriculture'.[1] Opium, in contrast, was becoming the signifier for an indigenous peasant economy dominated, seemingly to its detriment, by the original 'lazy native' whose brethren were being encountered by planter and administrator from Ceylon to Fiji. The connections between the production and consumption of tea and opium in Assam, and the cultural systems they came to represent provide an important theme to trace the reshaping of this region within British India.

As Chandavarkar points out, colonial discourse in India was preoccupied, to a large extent, with the question of acquiring closer control over labour.[2] This chapter goes on to examine the partnership of state structures and race science in subordinating labour more fully to the discipline of capitalism, specifically how the economy of the tea plantation was primarily concerned to acquire a labour force that would be cheap, socially malleable and politically inarticulate. Thereby, it looks at the implications which this process has had for the local and the migrant population of Assam. If plantations are to be viewed as 'microcosms of the colonial capitalist effort, at once compact and enormous ateliers in which racial, class, ethnic, and gender hierarchies were manipulated, contested and transformed',[3] then it is equally necessary to examine these ateliers in the larger spatial and cultural context they inhabit. Thus, this chapter locates the discourse around plantation in terms of its interactions with the

---

[1] See J.S. Furnivall, *An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma*, Rangoon, 1931.
[2] Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics*, Cambridge, 1998, p.23.
[3] Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979*, Yale, 1985, pp.1-2.

local peasant systems and the indigenous publics that were emerging within colonial India.

2 (1) The Birth of the Lazy Native

The discovery of the tea plant in Assam had appeared to hold out the idyllic prospect of an agrarian cornucopia within the region's wild recesses. This was with line with the general optimism which saw the objective of Empire as being to afford peoples across the world 'the opportunity of becoming partakers of that civilisation, that innocent commerce, that knowledge and that faith with which it has pleased a gracious Providence to bless our own country'.[4] However, after a few decades, colonial thought was veering towards a more pessimistic outlook. European science and capital seemed to be failing in bestirring the enervated existence of the native. The first burst of euphoria over Assam's agricultural prospects was being dispelled by the tacit refusal of the local population to enter the role it had been assigned within the colonial project. In 1861, the Chief Commissioner of the province mournfully assessed his charge.

> At present we take very little from the Assamese and we do very little for him. We do not intercept the bounty of nature on the one hand; on the other hand, we do not lead him to look for more than nature provides, place him in communication with the outer world, and put him in the way of acquiring new material wants, the result is that he remains an indolent sensual non-progressive being.[5]

This peroration offered a not unusual variation on the lazy native that Empire was to encounter in different corners of the globe, whose natural sloth rendered him unable to utilise his lands, or fully appreciate the material accoutrements of Western civilisation.[6]

It was into those nature-blessed territories of the Orient that a confluence of European science, agrarian patriotism and capitalism had guided the activities of surveying and

---

[4] Parliamentary Papers 1837; *Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements)*, 425, 7, p.76; cited by Martin Lynn, "British Policy, Trade and Informal Empire in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," in Andrew Porter ed., *The Nineteenth Century: The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Oxford, 1999, p.102.

[5] Home Revenue Proceedings, Nos. 8-10, August 1861; Letter from Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 14 May 1861, NAI.

[6] See Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, London, 1977 for a study of such encounters in Southeast Asia.

settlement, enthusing colonists that they would use resources more efficiently than the locals. Colonialism was virtually political alchemy, the work of 'transmuting one people into another'. Both people and land might be easily 'improved', if submitted to the discipline of those gifted by their superior knowledge.[7] In Assam, the nascent British administration readily subscribed to a thesis that outside agency, represented by the tea planters, was imperative to harness the region's potential. Thereafter, these men were to mount a relentless opposition to indigenous systems of land use, despite their own acquisition of the massive tracts that a liberal wastelands grants scheme had allowed.

> So long as Natives cut down large forest trees to scoop a boat from, to pluck fruit or seed from, or to reach a bird's nest; so long as Meekirs and others are allowed annually to destroy large tracts of virgin forest (which tracts do not become forest again, but grass jungle harbouring tigers), so long will men who are striving to make the most of a rich but neglected country feel bitterly the unequal law which restricts, even prohibits them from utilising for the purpose of legitimate industry that which the naked savage destroys wantonly with impunity...raising a howling wilderness.[8]

Such sentiments provide a striking instance of what Richard Drayton calls the myth of the Profligate Native: that whoever was on the spot was wasting the land's resources, and that therefore they might legitimately be expelled, or submitted to European tutelage. Indeed, imperialism itself, over the long term, was, from this perspective, 'a campaign to extend an ecological regime: a way of living in Nature premised on the virtues of sedentary agriculture and husbandry, private property, production for exchange, and ultimately manufacture'.[9] It had become a truism of colonial policy that the presence or absence of settled agriculture denoted the difference between civilisation and savagery, with a firm boundary between the two. Consequently, while swidden cultivation was tolerable in the hill areas inhabited by wild savages, in the civilised Assam valley, agriculture was required to be established on a sedentary footing, by introducing expedients such as decennial leases and higher rates on temporarily settled lands.

---

[7] Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain and the 'Improvement' of the World*, Yale, 2000, p.58.
[8] Evidence of Mr. F.V. Harvard of the Kaliabor Garden, *Report of the Commissioners on the Tea Cultivation of Assam, 1868: Papers Regarding the Tea Industry in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1873.
[9] Drayton, *Nature's Government*, p.232.

Such a policy totally ignored the ground reality of the Assam economy, one where all classes of peasants were accustomed to moving between different modes of land use and agricultural practice.[10] Contrary to the colonial assumption that swidden cultivation was confined to the more savage groups, even late into the nineteenth century, the bulk of Assam's peasantry practised a fluid continuum between permanent cultivation of garden lands, temporary use of other lands for dry crops, and an extensive use of non-arable commons for timber and other necessities. In a situation of abundant land availability, the peasant saw little attraction in the government's offer of a long-term lease for arable land or the planter's work on his estate. These flexible attitudes about the nature of land rights and land use could hardly be conceded to be legitimate by a European ruling elite whose own beliefs were diametrically opposite, as peasant groups in the metropole had already discovered. The nature of the peasant regime in Assam served to reinforce the colonial idée fixe that the intervention of European planters and immigrants from other regions was the only means to achieve economic progress. Thereby, the local preference for an annual lease where 'in the majority of cases the Assam peasant never contemplates a return to what he has resigned'[11] was only understandable since the former could 'scarcely do the work of women and boys in other parts of India'.[12] The planter S.E. Peal summed up the general opinion about the shortcomings of the indigenous population.

> It is usually supposed that what is suitable and just to Europeans should be equally suitable and just to natives, but I think the supposition is often erroneous...Natives generally prefer short tenures; and it seems unfortunate that they do so, as indicating a less fixed and improvable interest in their holdings.[13]

A fraught relationship between the Assam state and its people when it came to extracting labour was nothing new in itself. Such tensions had been a recurring feature in the partially monetised economy of the precolonial period, where extraction of labour services formed the main element of interaction between the Ahom regime and its subjects. Adult males termed as kanri paiks, in units of three or four called *gots*,

---

[10] Sanjib Baruah, "Clash of Resource Use Regimes in Colonial Assam: A Nineteenth-Century Puzzle Revisited", Journal of Peasant Studies, 28, (3), April 2001, pp.109-24.
[11] *Land Revenue Administration Report of Assam Valley Districts*, 1884-5, Shillong, 1885.
[12] No. 382; Vol. 26, 1848; Letters received from Government (Foreign Department), Assam Secretariat Files, ASA.
[13] Evidence of S.E. Peal, Sapakatie garden, in *Papers Regarding the Tea Industry*.

took turns to serve the state, for three or four months of the year, each paik assigned to build public works or work on noble estates or military service when the need arose, while the others looked after his land. Men with artisanal skills were allowed to make in-kind payments or contribute in terms of their specialized services. But the bulk of the paiks remained liable to obligatory manual service, though not tied down to a particular place, as long as they continued to serve. At the same time, the precolonial state's demands for services from its population were constantly challenged through the mediation of the satras, the great religious establishments whose inmates were exempt from state obligations. Documents of the later Ahom period frequently referred to the thousands of peasants who sought to evade their dues by migrating onto the vast lands that satras had brought under cultivation. An enduring symbol of this friction was the highway called the Dhodar *Ali* running through Upper Assam. It had been built by labour forcibly extracted by the Ahom monarch Gadadhar Singha from the inmates of Vaishnavite satras, and named as 'the road of the lazy'.[14] This tussle between monarch, peasant and satra was the precursor of a long struggle which reached culmination in the eighteenth century with the uprisings by peasant disciples of the Moamoria satra. In addition, within this labour-short precolonial economy, agrestic slavery was of considerable importance. At the close of the Ahom period, about 9-10% of the total population were servile *bandis* and *betis*, mostly on agricultural estates belonging to the old aristocracy and the high caste holders of *devottar* and *brahmottar* lands.[15]

Under the Ahoms, exemption from manual service was a privilege enjoyed by those entrusted with some office or status and continued, well into the colonial period, as an important marker of social respectability, often adduced in response to British attempts at recruiting coolie labour. By the nineteenth century, this economy had suffered massive depopulation, caused by the exigencies of war and the thousands of captives taken away by the Burmese and Singpho invaders. In his Assam Buranji, Gunabhiram Barua projected the population of Assam proper at 2.4 million before 1769.[16] He estimated that by 1826, the population had been reduced to an estimated

---

[14] Coincidentally, this road was the first object of attention from the Assam Company, whose 1841 Annual Report mentions that a sum of Rs 7,365:2:7 was expended upon mending the great highway road, called the Dodur Alee from Nazira to Gabroo Parbut.
[15] Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, Calcutta, 1985, p.56.
[16] S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771-1826*, Guwahati, 1949, p.1. He revises it to 2.5 million.

third of the former figure, less than 1 million.[17] In the new landscape of Empire, Assam appeared as a virtually empty land, a grave handicap as far as the new regime was concerned, with its requirements for cash revenue and wage labour. While the Ahom kings had denigrated their subjects who fled the corvée into the arms of religion as wastrels, their British successors would go one better by characterising an entire population as the laziest people under the sun. This discovery would accompany their promotion of a 'dual economy with a cleavage between the traditional subsistence sector and a capital-intensive, highly monetised modern sector'.[18]

2 (2) Chinese vs. Native *Jat*

As far as the modern sector of tea enterprise was concerned, a concerted campaign was underway, to rise above the unsatisfactory local *jat*, be it of people or plant. Jat was a vernacular term given wide currency by colonial officials and planters, which would retain its place in the Anglo-Indian lexicon long after the particular circumstances of its first use, to denote a natural 'essence', had passed.[19] This term, with its proximity to 'jati', signifying caste or race, became the location where the colonial regime could 'imagine' the existence of various groups among its subjects, premised upon their suitability to join the ranks of its labour force. But, initially, the shortcomings of Nature's bounty required alleviating. Thus, the opium trader member of the Tea Committee, G.J. Gordon was entrusted with smuggling a superior jat of tea seed out of China, to blend with the jungly variety discovered in Assam.[20] Such an improved plant would in turn require a civilised jat of worker to do it justice, under the supervision of European science and capital. As Joseph Banks, the first advocate of this imperial tea project had advised, a tea labour force, like the seed, should come from its original home, China. In addition, contemporary racial typologies were discovering the Chinese to be the most hard-working race Asia could provide, thereby the most satisfactory mediators between the polarities of Occident and Orient.[21] Their

---

[17] Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, p.142.
[18] Ibid, p.197.
[19] Personal communication from Nigel Chancellor as to its use to describe people, usually in derogatory terms, by an older generation of 'old India hands'.
[20] Similarly, in 1848, the explorer and botanist Robert Fortune was sent to 'proceed to China for the purpose of obtaining the finest varieties of Tea-plant, as well as native manufacturers and implements' for the new tea plantations in the Garhwal and Kumaon areas of the Himalayan foothills. See Robert Fortune, *A Journey to the Countries of China*, London, 1852.
[21] See Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*, London, 1995.

presence would reassure the London market as to the quality of the Assam harvest, as well as bypass 'the indolence and apathy of the local people' with their disinclination to work as long as they had 'enough rice and opium'.[22]

There was a further dimension to this import of tea labour and seed, for those empire builders who viewed it as the starting point of a British commercial expansion into Burma, Tibet and China. Francis Jenkins staunchly advocated the opening of such overland connections.

> I wrote some time ago to the Resident at Ava to take steps for opening the trade between Ava and Assam, always having in view the prospect of bringing a part of the trade of Yunnan direct into our province...If the road be once opened, we shall most assuredly be able to get Chinese cultivators...I look upon it as a sine qua non to the commencement of any tea cultivation that we should be able to get colonies direct of Shan or Chinese [which] would immensely extend the general commerce of the east of India...put Ava entirely at our disposal if the Burmahs should ever forget the last war...and bind us together in amity to proceed in detaching Yunnan from China, may be, in case of need.[23]

A grand schema of colonisation of the empty wastelands of Assam was what they envisaged, the improving capacity of European settlers buttressed by the hardworking labour brought from the Chinese provinces to the east of the Assam hills. The first attempts at such contact were none too successful - Jenkins' emissaries could not even proceed beyond Manipur. But further sorties were intermittently launched right into the 1860s, climaxing in an abortive proposal for a canal and railway running from Upper Assam to Yunnan.[24]

However, as far as the immediate labour requirements of the tea industry were concerned, misgivings about the Chinese soon crept in. The botanist William Griffith had agreed on the importance of securing 'a sufficient number of first-rate Chinese

---

[22] C.A. Bruce, cited by H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company, 1839-1953*, Edinburgh, 1957, p.375.
[23] Parliamentary Papers 1839, *Papers Relating to Measures for Introducing Cultivation of Tea Plant in British Possessions in India*, Vol. XXXIX, Paper 63; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 7 January 1835; Jenkins to Tea Committee, 6 January 1835.
[24] The surgeon John MacCosh who had written one of the most hyperbolic assessments of the resources of Assam, was one of the enthusiasts lending his pen to this project of overland communication with China in 1861. See *Topography of Assam*, London, 1837.

cultivators and manufacturers, both of black and green teas.'[25] But he found it necessary to enter a caveat, that 'this can only be done by the usual route; for I found that among all the so-called Chinese, who are to be met with at Mogaung, Bamo and Ava, as well as those among those who form the large annual caravans that trade with Burma there is not a single genuine Chinaman'.[26] Since most of the Chinese labourers brought in by the Assam Company's agents hailed by way of the migrant communities in Singapore and Penang, their authentic status as tea labour was open to question.[27] Apart from that, these Chinese workers rapidly displayed such 'obstreperousness as well as unsuitability for the local climate', that coupled with the higher wages they had to be paid, four or five times the local wage rate, all this soon outweighed fears that less civilised races might not be adequate substitutes to harness the bounty of nature.[28] By 1861, Jenkins had informed his superiors at Calcutta that it was impractical to think of drawing a surplus Chinese population to Assam when the Assam wages were barely half of what could be earned in Yunnan.[29]

After the Chinese experiment was abandoned in 1843, it was the local population of Assam which provided the category of labour which the tea industry would rely on for the next twenty years. That came from the Kachari inhabitants of the Lower Assam districts.

> Kacharis are the only natives that can be relied upon for work, and they form the only bright side to the labour question. They travel in gangs of ten to twenty, from garden to garden, and will not take a job unless they are assured of being allowed to do at least a double day's work in one day. After a garden is got into a good condition, and the work falls short, they will frequently pack up and move off to some other place, where their services are in demand.[30]

---

[25] PP 1839; Extract India Revenue Consultations 20 June 1836; Report on the Tea Plant of Upper Assam, by Mr. Assistant-surgeon William Griffith, Madras Establishment, late Member of Assam Deputation.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Letters issued to Government; Vol. 24, 1861, ASA.
[28] Antrobus, *A History*, p.383 and p.388.
[29] However, we see a planter on a Sadiya garden using Chinese 'coolies' to build his bungalow and furniture in the 1920s. Despite the use of the term 'coolie' for them, it is more likely that these were craftsmen who came into Assam through the Yunnan-Burma route and received higher wages for such skilled work, a far cry from back-breaking agricultural labour for the pittance they had been offered in the 1840s. See A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle*, London, 1944, pp. 72-3.
[30] George Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, Calcutta, 1884, p.126.

A whole host of traits was discerned to place the Kachari within the classification of 'industrious primitive' that colonial ethnography was developing. One such trait was a 'share in the marvellous freedom from the effects of malaria which characterises nearly all the Tamulian aborigines of India, as the Kols, the Bheels and the Gonds'[31] an important consideration for a labour force in the jungles where the plantations were located. 'Primitive' habits were discerned to distinguish the Kachari from the region's other inhabitants with their apparently self-sufficient indolence.

> Except for the Cacharees, very few indeed of the Assamese are ever induced to labour for hire; there are not probably five Assamese coolies in Gowahatty amongst many hundreds of daily labourers; as cottiers they can live comfortably without having recourse to hire themselves. The reason why the Cacharee do so is probably due to their expensive habits of drinking...they consume so much of their rice in making spirits that they are obliged to labour to pay their rents. But besides, the Cacharees and other rude tribes were in a manner the Helots of the Hindu population and are, consequently, accustomed to labour. [32]

Other reports stated that the Kachari were entering service with the intention of earning sufficient cash to pay off their land revenue dues or the customary bride price in most cases. With the money so earned, they often settled down as independent cultivators in the tea districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, instead of returning to their villages.[33]

Rather than accepting such reasoning positing a relationship between ethnic traits and work capacity, we need to go beyond the labels of Kachari and Assamese and unwrap them for the overarching categories they were, as signifiers for different modes of technology and lived practice. Those Kachari peasants recruited by the tea plantations hailed from groups in Lower Assam that either used hoes or were passing through the transition from hoe to plough, as distinguished from the wet rice cultivating caste Hindus termed as Assamese. The description by one official makes this difference quite clear.

> The population in Dhurmpore...are mostly Assamese who cultivate only with the plough, Cacharees and Mikirs who cultivate much of the lands by the hoe alone, without the assistance of plough cattle, changing their

---

[31] J.W. Kaye and J. Forbes Watson ed., *People of India*, London, 1868,Vol. 1, p. 27.
[32] Francis Jenkins, "Report on the Revenue Administration of the Province of Assam," 1849-50, DHAS.
[33] Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, p.165.

> grounds every three to four years and allowing their old fields to run to jungle and remain fallow nine to ten years.[34]

The submontane ecology of their districts, where they mostly cultivated *ahu* rice on *faringati* ('dry crop land') required fallowing after every three years or so of continuous cultivation. Rather than racial characteristics predetermining their responses to work, it appears to be the modes of land use among such groups that sent them upon temporary migrations to the tea-growing areas.

Therefore, we can view the Kachari labour coming onto the plantations as seasonal migrants, constrained to enter into wage contracts in the cash-short economy of Assam, where other channels were limited. 'Cacharie labourers almost invariably engage on an agreement to receive Rs 6 per month for single task work, and very frequently they stipulate for double task work for double pay.'[35] This background explained their desire to work double shifts and their displeasure when the work, and consequently the payments, were insufficient. It is worthwhile noting the contrast with the peasantry of the fertile Upper Assam districts, sali rice cultivators using the plough, who were very reluctant to work anywhere away from their own villages.[36] Nonetheless, by the later nineteenth century as a cash and market economy made inroads, even the local peasant abhorrence of garden labour eroded somewhat, but on his own terms, which was not what the planters wanted.

> It is a very rare thing indeed for an Assamese living at a distance to leave his home for the mere inducement of getting work in a tea garden. Their taking such work at all is generally attributed to temporary necessity, as for instance, inability to pay their revenue, wanting to get married and not having the necessary means, being in debt to a Keya, or as more commonly happens, pawning their freedom, being in want of a yoke of buffaloes for cultivating purposes.[37]

The most frequent complaint against all these local coolies, whether Assamese or Kachari, was their tendency to come and go as they pleased. The tea industry records were full of complaints about their unwillingness to start work without a 'large

---

[34] Foreign Political Consultations, Nos. 106-8, 6 June, 1833-6, NAI.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, p.69.
[37] Foreign Political Consultations, Nos. 106-8, 6 June, 1833-6, NAI.

advance' and even then, 'after working a few days they go home'.[38] Despite the state arming the planters the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act in 1859, instituting such 'tedious civil cases' was not of much use to the employers when the defendants had practically no attachable property to speak of.[39] A local peasant, in a context of abundant land around him, could never be reduced to a body of wage labour dependent on the capitalist for its very survival. Ultimately, the logic of colonial capitalism was to dictate that the 'simple, hardworking' Cacharee and the 'indolent' Assamese were equally inconvenient for its labour requirements. The same economic rationality which made indentured coolies from thousands of miles away essential for the culture of sugar, rubber, coffee in Fiji, Mauritius, the West Indies, and which created their status as bewildered uprooted migrants, would now be employed for the gardens of Assam.

2 (3) Coolie: Locating the 'Authentic'

The origins of the term 'Coolie' are obscure, but like many other cosmopolitan categories, it was given wide currency by the Portuguese in Asia who then passed it onto other European sailors and merchants. A Dutch compiler in 1726, F. Valentijn, in his Oud en Nieuw Oost Indien supplied a definition, 'Coelies, bearers of all sorts of burdens', a usage continuing into the age of Raffles in his History of Java.[40] By the later nineteenth century, coolie was appearing in India and China as a loan word in vernacular dictionaries.[41] Coolie continued to be used to signify a person recruited for load bearing work, but gradually an additional, more particular usage emerged, in the context of the plantation. It was this new usage that dominated the linguistic lineage that British Indian ethnography was constructing. Attributions such as H.H. Wilson's, who had traced the term to the Tamil 'kuli' or wages for menial work, failed to gain wide acceptance.[42] Instead, with race science seeing labouring capacity as a racial characteristic, 'coolie', from being any worker at the lowest end of the industrial

---

[38] Ibid.
[39] Evidence of C. Haxell, Seconie Estate, *Papers Regarding the Tea Industry*. This Act was repealed only in the 1920s, well after the penal contracts had been abolished between 1908 and 1915.
[40] T. Stamford Raffles, *History of Java*, London, 1817.
[41] In Chinese, it appears in two characters k'u ('bitter') and li ('strength'). H.A. Giles, whose Chinese-English Dictionary appeared in 1892, regarded the word as of foreign origin, and so have later lexicographers. Cited from Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920*, London, 1993.
[42] Arthur Coke Burnell and Henry Yule, *Hobson-Jobson; a Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian words and Phrases*, London, 1883 (reprint 1903), pp.249-51.

labour market, was being annexed to an ascribed ethnicity. Thus, the administrator and ethnographer George Campbell saw fit to declare that the Kol tribal of the Central Provinces was the common source of the name of the 'Kolarian race' as well of 'coolie', a permeation of race, tribe and occupational categories thereafter enshrined in Hobson-Jobson, the bible of Anglo-Indian language.[43] This section will show how a process of internal displacement for the Kol and other neighbouring groups from one part of the subcontinent to another ensured their suitability for the Assam plantations, but how a discourse of race and civilisation sought to obscure the material contours of their reification as coolies.

In the 1840s, the first discussions around tea had focused upon importing the best possible breed for its seed and labour, in preference to the indigenous variety. We find various emissaries, from G.J. Gordon to Robert Fortune, making sorties into China with the objective of furthering tea cultivation in 'the mountainous areas of Hindustan'. However, just as the Chinese seed would be discovered to be less hardy than its once despised jungly cousin, the civilised Chinese labourer, with the high wages and better working conditions he demanded, was less desirable for the Assam plantation.[44] In the first few years of tea enterprise, Charles Bruce and his colleagues had not realised that while the Chinese grower's expertise was initially necessary, his system of cultivation was not. Rather than perpetuating the tea forest of the Khamti or the household production of the Chinese, British colonial capital would prefer to grow tea on an industrial scale. Under the supervision of the colonial planter, the prime requirement was a vast pool of cheap, docile labour - not the skilled Chinese tea grower they had previously sought.[45] It was in the identification of this workforce that the tea industry would take recourse to the findings of race science, and the experiences of other planter regimes.

---

[43] Ibid. Also, the *Oxford English Dictionary* subsequently attempted to reconcile these two linguistic ancestries, giving the English word 'coolie' a derivation both from the Tamil 'kuli' and the Gujarati 'Koli'.

[44] The works by Ann Laura Stoler and others have provided illuminating instances of how the Chinese labour on the Sumatran tobacco plantation, for example, came to be less than satisfactory for his obstreperous behaviour and higher wages, compared to the impoverished Javanese coolie brought in to replace him.

[45] Various studies have pointed out that in comparison with coffee, for instance, tea required nearly nine months of diligent attention and a more stable work force, as well as larger investment in terms of factory facilities. See Paul Erik Baak, *Plantations, Production and Political Power*, Delhi, 1997, p.72. This has also been responsible for the shift in Assam, by the end of the nineteenth century, from smaller enterprises to domination by a few managing agency houses.

Recent studies have drawn valuable connections between the imagining of ideal coolie types from India for the overseas sugar industry and the ways in which this wisdom was then assimilated into the labour requirements of the tea plantations in Eastern India.[46] Through the nineteenth century, the colonial pacification of another wild 'frontier', the Chotanagpur-Santal Parganas, was forcibly transforming its inhabitants into docile and hardworking coolies. 'Dhangar, Boonah, Jungli, Kol' were the vernacular epithets used by the inhabitants of the Bengal plains for the people inhabiting their hilly peripheries. Kaushik Ghosh has graphically described how the British 'coolie campaigns' in Central India were causing those formerly discrete groups to be flattened out into a new eponymous Dhangar - the aborigine who stood out from other primitive groups in his suitability for a life of indentured labour. Rather than their inherent proclivity for such work that colonial officials would approvingly cite, it was the circumstances of the British military pacification of these lands that would force their once 'fierce hillmen' into becoming a labour reservoir for the British Empire. Ghosh sees a discourse of primitivity around the Dhangar first developing in the 1830s around discussions about coolies for overseas plantations. By the 1860s, it had acquired the status of full blown wisdom for the Assam coolie trade.[47]

Contemporary race science was not slow in assimilating the wisdom provided from such contact with the various labouring groups in British India. While an early theorist such as Brian Hodgson clubbed together the tribal inhabitants of Assam and Chotanagpur as Turanians or aboriginals,[48] subsequently, the two groups were deemed to possess very different traits, in keeping with their differing status in colonial labour classification. This was formally established by the future Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, George Campbell who modified Hodgson's scheme to

---

[46] See Kaushik Ghosh, "A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India," in *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. X, ed. Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu, New Delhi, 1999, pp.8-48. Also Ranajit Das Gupta, "Plantation Labour in Colonial India," in E. Valentine Daniel, Henry Bernstein and Tom Brass ed., *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia,* London, 1992, pp.180-1.

[47] Kaushik Ghosh, "A Market for Aboriginality," p.31.

[48] Brian Houghton Hodgson, "On the Origin, Location, Numbers, Creed, Customs, Character and Condition of the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal People with a general description of the climate they dwell in," in *Miscellaneous Essays Relating to Indian Subjects*, London, 1880, Vol. 1, Section 1, (first printed in Calcutta, 1847), pp.1-160.

distinguish between the Kolarian of Chotanagpur and the Borderer of the Northeast frontier.[49] Campbell now devised a distinct category of Kolarian tribes, 'a simple industrious people'.

> Unlike most aboriginal tribes in most parts of the world, Dhangars seem by no means to be dying out, but multiply and supply the labour market. Partly on account of the cheapness of labour in their country, partly on account of their tractable disposition and freedom from all caste and food prejudices, and more especially, I think, because of that want of attachment to the soil which distinguishes the Aboriginal from the Arian, they are much sought after and highly prized as labourers. Many of them are settled in the service of Bengal Indigo-Planters; they are very well known as labourers on the Railways, roads and other works of Western Bengal; and they are now, I believe, the favourite material for emigration to Assam.[50]

Campbell's work was in the mainstream of the intellectual terrain for mid-Victorian race science, with the priority it gave to the ordering of nature and human beings into categories. What he omitted to mention was how the subjects of his study in Assam and Chotanagpur had been affected by the differing trajectory of colonial policy in those territories. While the dispossessed Kolarian had little alternative but to migrate, and to labour on whatever terms were held out to him, the Borderer of the Northeast, i.e. the Kachari peasant, still possessed a choice.

The most popular category that this confluence of science and political economy was to engender was that of the Dhangar. Campbell's linkage between Coolie, Kol/Koli and Dhangar was fast becoming a favourite for ethnographers, administrators and planters. In his Ethnology of India, Campbell went on to mention, in his listing of tribes, 'Dhangars; that last term being one the proper meaning of which I cannot ascertain, but which, as far as I can learn, is applied generically to the aboriginal labourers in Calcutta'.[51] Following this, Hobson-Jobson would define Dhangar as 'the name by which member of various tribes of Chutia Nagpur... are generally known when they go out to distant lands to seek employment as labourers (coolies)'.[52] In the quest for a holy grail of labour, this figure would become the ultimate prize for

---

[49] George Campbell, "The Ethnology of India," Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Supplementary Number, Vol. 30, Part 2.
[50] Campbell, "The Ethnology of India." Also see Ravi Ahuja, *Captain Kittoe's Road': Early Colonialism and the Politics of Road Construction in Peripheral Orissa*, Unpublished paper, August 2001, for an account of the use of Dhangars for Orissa road building in 1840-1.
[51] Campbell, "The Ethnology of India."
[52] Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 249.

plantations spanning the length and breadth of the British empire. The displaced tribal from Central and Eastern India, once united under this appellation, was a far more convenient subject for both colonial science and capital. The powerful symbiosis between the extractive political economy of colonialism and its intellectual frontiers cannot be better illustrated than in its union of Coolie, Dhangar and Indenture upon the Plantation. In Assam, we shall see how the higher wages and the obstreperous demands by Chinese and Assamese labour were replaced by a penal regime forced upon the migrant whose admission the state was facilitating.

In the Assam gardens, the failure to assimilate the advanced workers of Asia, i.e. the Chinese, or the local primitive, i.e. the Kachari, was now understandable, since what was actually required was their polar opposite - 'aboriginal' migrants who could be controlled and regimented in the manner which those previous groups had strongly resisted. The administration never ceased to grumble about the difficulties associated with the local labour force, attributed indiscriminately to natural laziness, climatic lassitude, opium addiction or peasant prosperity. But a solution was being offered by colonial science's procurement of the Dhangar. Mauritius and Trinidad were the first destinations where this labour force had been dispatched, but the fledgling tea industry was not far behind in its desire for this seemingly ideal jat. Recruiting parties for Assam had in fact arrived in Chotanagpur as early as 1839, but they met with indifferent success. By the 1850s, stringent medical checks were limiting overseas migration and making the previously unknown tea plantations an alternative option.[53] By the end of the nineteenth century, the Dhangar had obtained the position of 'Class I jungley' among Assam coolies, his primitive instincts supposedly rendering him impervious to conditions even upon the worst tea estates.[54] The special correspondent of The Times could now lyrically report on the tea coolie,

> The labourer has been withdrawn from the fierce battle of the millions amid the storm and stress of varying seasons into the constant shadow of prosperity and peace. Henceforward, he has nothing to fear. He is protected from famine, from fraud, from violence, from violence, from usury, from all manner of external ills. For him and his like alone among the poor of India the problem of life is solved.[55]

---

[53] Kaushik Ghosh, "A Market for Aboriginality," p.30.
[54] *Report of the Labour Enquiry Commission of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1896.
[55] Quoted by H.J. Cotton, *Indian and Home Memories*, London, 1911, p.264.

This account purported to describe the estimated 700,000 and 750,000 recruits for the tea industry who came to Assam between 1870 and 1900 (both men and women), of whom about 250,000 were from Chotanagpur.[56] However, the reality of their new life under the penal regime of indenture was as far removed as possible from the 'prosperity and peace' that this mouthpiece of the City had discovered.

Recruitment to Assam was either by tea garden sirdars or directly by *arkattis* ('village recruiters') from Chotanagpur and the other districts where labour migration had become a regular feature. Given the lesser degree of state supervision compared with overseas migration in this period, the abuses there as well as upon the plantations, were staggering in their scope. Their impact was evident in the low birth rate and infant survival rate as well as the high numbers of abortions among coolie women.[57] Despite the planters' complaints of the high cost of importing this labour force, their ability to impose starvation wages and a draconian work regime upon these migrants meant that the need to put up with the vagaries of the Chinese or the Kachari no longer existed. Now unhampered by the choice to leave that local workers had enjoyed, colonial capital was able to use semi-feudal methods to an optimal point, subjecting ostensibly free labourers to a kind of serfdom. They were virtually imprisoned in the squalor of the coolie lines, locked in at night, in the middle of forested terrain, and with no contact possible with local inhabitants. Flight was well nigh impossible for these immigrants, since their ignorance of local territory, coupled with bounties paid to local hill dwellers to track them with dogs, ensured that the plantation existence had to be borne against all provocation.[58] The tea industry's success in evading the costs that participation in a truly 'free' labour market would have entailed was quite apparent even to contemporary observers. In 1864, while a PWD labourer could earn Rs 7 p.m., the going rate in the Assam Company was only Rs 4-5 and descended as low as Rs 3.50 on some other gardens. As Behal and Mohapatra point out, the ultimate goal of the indentured labour and penal contract systems that the colonial government had devised was not to provide the Dhangar

---

[56] Tinker, *A New System*, p.50.
[57] See *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906*, Calcutta, 1906.
[58] *Papers Regarding the Tea Industry*. Jan Breman has similarly shown how the indigenous Batak people on the Sumatran East Coast were coopted into becoming premium hunters, tracking down escaping coolies for the planters. See *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial Order in Southeast Asia*, Delhi, 1989, p.157.

with a livelihood, but to enable planters to bypass the wage structures prevalent in the labour market.[59] By the logic of capitalist enterprise, such measures seemed entirely justified, as Indian tea acquired a leading position in the world market, outstripping China in 1888 for the first time, and obtaining 57% of the British market by 1901.[60]

2 (4) Peasant Degeneracy banished by Opium

While the new gardens were growing tea, another primary commodity, opium, played a much more important role in the livelihood of Assam's indigenous population. While its consumption became indelibly associated with a self-image of the Assamese in the persona of the *kaniya* ('lazy opium-eater'), all evidence indicates that it started off as a luxury consumed within the courtly lifestyle of the precolonial *dangariya*. The indigenous gentry remarking on opium's increasing spread were essentially concerned about its consumption by ordinary people, after its cultivation had taken off in Assam, supposedly introduced by the military mercenaries of the eighteenth century.[61] Certainly, when Captain Welsh arrived with his expedition in 1792, he witnessed it growing abundantly in Lower Assam. Welsh noted that 'a great quantity of opium is produced and used by the inhabitants. In point of purity it is probably equal to that of Patna or Benares but it is prepared in a different form, being reduced to a dry state by exposure to the air spread on narrow strips of cloth, which are afterwards rolled up into small balls and called Kanee or Kappa'.[62] By 1829, Haliram Dhekial Phukan stated that there was almost no place in Assam where opium was not in cultivation.[63] A medical report compiled shortly after the British takeover estimated that 80% of the Assamese population were using opium. [64]

For the nineteenth-century peasant, rice was the staff of life, with three varieties, sali, ahu and *bao*, grown by the peasant according to the type of land and technology at his

---

[59] R.P. Behal and P. Mohapatra, "'Tea and Money versus Human Life': the Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations: 1840-1908", in Daniel, Bernstein, Brass ed., *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, p.143.
[60] Behal and Mohapatra, "'Tea and Money versus Human Life,'" p.150.
[61] A.J. Moffat Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1854 (reprint Guwahati, 1982); Appendix K.B., Translation of a Petition from Moneeram Borwah Dewan, p.606.
[62] "Report of Captain Welsh", in H.K. Barpujari, *An Account of Assam and Her Administration*, Guwahati, 1988, p.86.
[63] Haliram Dhekial Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, Calcutta, 1829 (reprint Guwahati, 1962), p.109.
[64] Foreign Political Proceedings 'A', No. 93, 15 April 1831; G. Lamb to J. Hutchinson, Secretary, Medical Board, Dacca, NAI.

command. Mustard and pulses were the other considerable crops, apart from opium. Only the last was regularly watered on the fields, due to its increasing importance as a marketable crop for the cash-strapped peasant, with money advances being regularly distributed by the Marwari traders, locally known as Keyas.[65] The average after-harvest price of indigenous opium in the 1840s was Rs 5 per seer but the retail price could be as high as Rs 80 in the lean months. Opium accounted for more than 50% of the total value of exports from Lakhimpur district in 1852. Its value was calculated at average price of Rs 5.46 per seer. In the same year, Nowgong, the main opium district, had more than 3000 acres, about 2% of its total cultivated acreage, under the plant.[66] It was only through sales of opium and mustard to Marwari intermediaries that the peasant could deal with his new revenue dues, and acquire a few market necessities such as salt.[67] His main crop, rice, was cultivated almost entirely for subsistence, since a market developed fairly slowly, despite the impetus it received from the demands of the tea plantations.

Significantly, this highly 'rational' aspect of opium cultivation was largely evaded in the discussions by administrators, planters and missionaries. Rather than opium as a commercial crop under peasant control, opium as a homegrown, morally dubious luxury came to be their key focus. Some sections of medical opinion conceded its medicinal properties in a malarial climate, but the more usual reaction was to castigate indigenous society for indulgence. What seemed most outrageous to most commentators was the fact that like the alcohol of the English factory worker, opium was a needless luxury for those in humble circumstances. The moral turpitude was all the more here, with this luxury obtained virtually free from the peasant's own garden, and in such abundance that he could afford to regale even his wife and child with it![68] What made opium use the definitive sign of the Profligate Native was that not content with wasting nature's bounty, he was abusing it to put the seal upon his own inadequacies. As Captain John Butler's memoir magisterially declared, 'the utter want

---

[65] Thomas A. Timberg, *The Marwaris: From Traders to Industrialists,* New Delhi, 1978, p.43.
[66] John Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam during a Residence of Fourteen Years*, London, 1855, p.244 and pp.258-9; Guha, *Medieval and Early Medieval Assam*, p.141 and p.166.
[67] Again, the indispensable intermediaries here were the Keyas who controlled the salt, opium, mustard and grain trades.
[68] Evidence from District Collectors, in *Papers Relating to Tea Cultivation in Assam*, Calcutta, 1861.

of an industrious, enterprising spirit and the general degeneracy of the Assamese people are greatly promoted by the prevalent use of opium'.[69]

Despite this moralising rhetoric, the East India Company had itself conducted a long standing relationship with opium, with a British-Indian monopoly in place since 1773 to suit the needs of the China trade and to meet Indian remittances. Increasingly, the China trade provided a large portion of the East India Company's budgetary revenue. But given the vicissitudes of the China trade, the Company still needed to find other markets close at hand where surplus opium supplies could be absorbed. John Crawfurd had pointed out in 1837 that apart from China and the Malayan islands, 'the countries lying between India and China' would be 'great marts for its consumption'.[70] Accordingly, arrangements were made to sell Bengal opium in Assam through government treasuries in the 1840s and 1850s. But these met with little success, due to the abundance of the local supply.[71] In order to limit the latter's growth, Scott and Jenkins had both suggested, in the first decade of British rule, that the tax on local opium should be gradually raised. However, this suggestion was never taken up. Instead, the recommendation made by Justice Mills seemed to dictate the future course of policy, 'opium they should have, but to get it they should be made to work for it'.[72]

Work, or the lack of it, was after all the crucial issue here. An occasional voice did point out that there was no reason why a peasant should want to toil on a plantation when land availability, a humid climate and the dreaded memory of the corvée all rendered it an unattractive, even irrational option. But for the most part, as the new regime settled in, native indolence appeared to require intervention. The British improving agenda was handicapped by Nature herself, with 'the fertility of the soil such that one month's labour is enough to maintain a family in comfort for a

---

[69] John Butler, A *Sketch of Assam by an Officer in the Hon. East India Company's Bengal Native Infantry*, London, 1847, p.35.
[70] Quoted in K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Economic Development of India, 1814-1858: A Selection of Contemporary Writings*, Cambridge, 1971, pp.250-51.
[71] Mills, *Report*, Memorandum from Captain Matthie, p.75.
[72] Mills, *Report*, p.21.

year...this is the main reason for the province not being prosperous...(it) enables natives to live without exertion.'[73] As the District Collector Captain Rowlatt testified,

> It is the low cost and great ease with which every ryot is able to procure a supply of opium that so thoroughly demoralizes the whole people; if he had to purchase it, he would probably not give it to his wife and certainly not to his children. Now it is consumed by all alike. This, if it produces no worse consequence, most certainly induces great laziness, and as long as this remains, as it is at present, the peculiar characteristic of the Assamese people, they neither can be good cultivators nor industrious workmen.[74]

If opium was the major cause of the peasant's disinclination to improve his lot, his attachment to it could be used as a lever to force him out of that torpid existence. The Rev. Mr. Higgs of the S.P.G. assured officials that 'the abkarry opium is only supplying the place of the indigenous drug, and by forcing the lazy natives to work to gain the money to pay for it, tends more than anything to bring Assam under cultivation'.[75] It followed that if the supply from the peasant garden was removed by government dictat, it would do more to raise the 'moral and material progress' of the province than anything else. In this view, the locals were in any case outside the portals of economic rationality, since 'never having had much intercourse with civilised people, being surrounded by wild hill tribes and governed by a despotic government, they scarcely know the value of money, or of luxuries, except opium grown by themselves'.[76] An unanimous body of colonial opinion advocated as its solution, the total prohibition of opium cultivation in Assam, finally implemented in 1861.[77] Its ultimate justification lay in the hierarchy established for the different races within empire, where even 'the Burman is lazy enough but there are some things...for which he will exchange a portion of his leisure, while only hard necessity appears to reconcile the Assamese to the abstraction of a moment from his employment of perfect indolence'.[78] From now on, that 'hard necessity' would be the buying of opium, the stimulus of having to purchase the commodity at the government's

---

[73] Home Public Proceedings, Nos. 15-18, 10 September 1858; a letter from C. Alabaster, Interpreter attached to the ex-Imperial Commissioner, to Mr. Beadon, Secretary to Government of India, attaching a communication from the Rev. Mr. Higgs, a missionary in Assam for eight years, NAI.

[74] Evidence from District Collectors, in *Papers Relating to Tea Cultivation.*

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Though it is necessary to mention here that the American Baptist Mission opposed the government's policy strongly, as they did its licensing of spirituous liquors. For instance, representations were made to abolish opium sale except for medicinal purposes. *Assam Mission Third Triennial Conference Report*, Nowgong, 1893, p.87.

[78] Evidence from District Collectors, in *Papers Relating to Tea Cultivation.*

licensed marts would apparently bring the Assamese peasant onto the labour market in increasing numbers and, as a pious after thought, decrease his consumption of it.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, we see the peasant gardens with poppy being prohibited by law, replaced by a government-licensed regime of opium shops. Since the 'degeneracy of the people' was accentuated by the peasant's readiness, and ability, to give the substance to his women and children, there was also the smug complacency that this would no longer be the case. The Assamese male would work on the plantations, for opium, and its increasing price would deter its consumption by the rest of his household. This argument certainly never worked out in reality, not least due to the emergence of the Dhangar as the preferred subject for plantation labour. But it is very revealing of the assumptions which were coming in about the nature of the peasant household, the construction of female and child bodies as located within a different order of consumption, and production, than male ones. Indeed, this takes us back to another striking feature of this discourse - the eliding of the woman worker within the figure of the man. In the rice economy, for instance, a significant part of its chores such as the transplantation of seedlings was the preserve of women. The other significant peasant activity in the river-dependent economy of Assam was fishing, and here , women were prominent both in fishing itself and selling the produce. Within the new tea sector too, women coolies were increasingly sought after, as the industry gradually perfected the delicate manoeuvres necessary to harvest 'two leaves and a bud'. Yet, the general discussions about peasant or coolie work continually elided the 'she' within the 'he'. When the role of women was mentioned specifically, it served as an occasion to impugn the native male, with the observation, for instance, that in Assam, 'labour is divided unequally among men and women...[since] the weaker sex uncomplainingly do the harder share...these are no men who permit women to carry heavy burdens'.[79] Such a rhetoric of emasculation, enshrined for posterity in official documents such as the census reports, certainly played a role in the increasing self-consciousness displayed by indigenous publicists about female participation in fishing, cultivating and trading under the public gaze.[80]

---

[79] Ramsden, *Assam Planter*, p.79.
[80] See Chapter 5 of the dissertation.

Another way of viewing this 1861 ban on opium cultivation is as part of a larger package of revenue measures being imposed upon the peasant population in the second half of the nineteenth century, all springing from the same motive. If the native had not previously worked as the state required, he would now be forced to do so. The state had previously been too lax in its demands upon the local peasant, with setbacks for the larger goal of improvement. All sections of colonial opinion were agreed in condemning the local as not just lazy, but as too comfortable for his own good. Nature had set the stage, and the British state had misguidedly colluded in allowing everyone to be 'well clothed and in comfortable circumstances' without sufficient exertion. Thus, the concern was expressed that 'the want of industrious habits on the part of the Assamese may be ascribed to a great measure to the lowness of the assessments and the largeness of the profits acquired by the lightest toil'.[81] With such opinions, it came as no surprise that district officials recommended a rise in the government demand. This would supposedly force the Assamese onto the plantations, thereby securing their own benefit, as well as the planter's.

> The ryots have the very greatest objection to exert themselves in the least degree, so long as they have sufficient rice and opium: and any measure which would raise the Assamese people from the lethargy induced by the excessive indulgence in the use of opium would unquestioningly result in an improved condition of the people both physically and morally, at the same time that an increased rate of taxation would oblige the ryot to work and thus benefit both himself and the tea planters.[82]

Even before a survey of Assam's agricultural lands was in sight, the colonial state had begun a frequent enhancement of revenue rates, ostensibly in its desire to reverse the province's deficit status. This provoked the first Assamese magistrate, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan into protesting that the assessment on some wet rice lands already equalled half their gross produce.[83] Despite such sentiments from indigenous public opinion, the regime's faith in tax enhancement continued apace. Proposals were mooted in 1858 for new dues to be introduced, not just to 'raise land tax from 4 annas per bigha to at least Rs 2' but also for 'a considerable poll tax'.[84] It was the anger at

---

[81] Home Revenue Proceedings, Nos. 8-10, August 1861, NAI.
[82] Evidence from Captain A.K. Comber, Principal Assistant Commissioner of Darrang in 1859, in *Papers Relating to Tea Cultivation.*
[83] Mills, *Report*, Appendix J, Observations on the Administration of the Province of Assam by Baboo Anandaram Dakeal Phookun, p.102.
[84] Communication from the Rev. Mr. Higgs in Home Public Proceedings, Nos. 15-18, NAI.

such impositions, allied to the ban on opium cultivation, an impending tax on pan cultivation and the passing of an 'Act for imposing a duty on Arts, Trades and Dealings' which sparked off the 1861 peasant uprising at Phulaguri when a British officer was killed.[85] Official wisdom, however, preferred to view this as a 'riot' caused by a supposed attachment of the aboriginal tribes to opium rather than accept its validity as an expression of protest by the indigenous population against the state's arbitrary tinkering with their livelihood.[86] This was clearly not an isolated sentiment, as the missionary periodical, the Orunodoi, made clear. 'There is a growing spirit of discontent among the people in consequence of the greatly increased taxation. They openly murmur and all sorts of evil stories are in circulation in the villages calculated to increase this discontent'.[87] Despite this, in 1867-8, the government almost doubled the existing rates, again without a survey.[88] The Administrative Report for 1880-81 confidently asserted that

> The great abundance of culturable land, the light assessment, the high prices commanded by every kind of labour, all contribute to produce a state of society where the stimulus towards enterprise and the struggle for life are entirely unknown...It is rare to find a cultivator who has not laid up in his granary food sufficient for two or three years consumption and should he have enough difficulty in selling enough of the hoarded grain to pay rent or revenue, a few days labour on a tea plantation or on the roads will place him in possession of a sufficient sum...[89]

The long awaited cadastral survey of the region between 1883 and 1893, made things considerably worse by imposing another massive increase, this time nearly 53% over earlier rates. Not unnaturally, this brought about renewed peasant unrest, with the *mels* ('assemblies') which had coordinated activity in 1861 once again at the fore. The exceptionally high assessment brought together in protest local notables, 'dolois, gosains and the principal landholders' with the general run of the peasantry, evident from the memorials by Babu Jibonram Phukan, Babu Sonaram Das, Babu Satyanath

---

[85] Home Public Proceedings, No. 88, 30 November 1861; Letter from Major Hopkinson, Agent, Governor General, North East Frontier, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, NAI.
[86] B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers*, Vol. 6: Nowgong, Calcutta, 1905, p.57.
[87] "General Intelligence," Orunodoi, March 1868.
[88] It can be pointed out here that the Madras Revenue Survey had been in progress since 1856, and the Bombay ones since 1836, and Punjab and Lower Provinces in full force since 1847, the end of the First Sikh War.
[89] *Assam Administrative Report*, 1880-81, Shillong, 1882, p.17.

Borah and Babu Danish Mohammad.[90] This uprising struck its contemporaries as being, as the Amrita Bazar Patrika speculated, one of the first occasions that ryots had directly rebelled against the state. 'In the Deccan, the fury of the ryots was directed against the moneylenders, in Bengal against the moneylenders in 1860, and in Pabna against the zamindars in 1872. But in Assam, at this moment, it is open rebellion against Government'.[91] Taken aback by the scale of the protests, which had convulsed practically entire Kamrup, Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh, the government belatedly condescended to content itself with a 32.7% increase.[92] Despite this partial backtracking by the state, we can estimate that its total land revenue demand more than quadrupled between 1865-66 and 1897-98 (from about Rs 1 million to over Rs 4 million), while the growth of cultivated acreage under all crops under than tea remained at less than 7%, with little visible increase in productivity. It would be pertinent to mention here that the plantation sector paid no income tax until the 1920s. In 1927, 40% of its profits were assessed as being of industrial origin and taxed on that basis. Until Indian independence in 1947, Assam planters avoided land taxes altogether, since their holdings were partly revenue free and partly on concessional terms.

A righteous official rhetoric on opium continued, just as its sale to peasant and coolie through licensed opium shops became the most significant contributor to Assam Government coffers. In 1880-81, of a total excise revenue of Rs 19 lakhs, more than Rs 15 lakhs came from opium sales.[93] And the government could blithely declare,

> The Chief Commissioner has issued strict injunctions that consumption of opium is not to be encouraged among the hill tribes who have not yet taken to it, but it is impossible to be strict among the Assamese where the habit has grown inveterate, nor is there any sufficient evidence to show that opium is generally consumed to an extent which is injurious to health.[94]

The state monopoly of its distribution allowed the price to be gradually raised from Rs 24 per seer in 1860 to Rs 37 in 1890-1, a point high enough to maximise the excise

---

[90] Revenue and Agriculture Proceedings 'A', Nos. 22-24, March 1894; Memorial Regarding Re-assessment of Assam Valley districts, NAI.
[91] "Editorial", Indian Nation , 12 February, 1894, ASA.
[92] Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, p.234.
[93] *Assam Administrative Report*, 1880-81, p.27.
[94] Ibid.

revenue but not to be beyond the reach of the consumer.[95] Since labour requirements continued to be increasingly supplied from outside Assam, with only about 7% of coolies of local origin, the amelioration of the lazy native was no longer for plantation work, but served as a convenient fiction for Government to optimise its demands from its subjects. Ironically, opium was becoming as popular on the tea garden as in the Assamese village, with the active connivance of the planter who issued it to his workforce via the state licensed mart run by the resident Keya.[96]

2 (5) Ahom Slavery and British Progress

By the early nineteenth century, British political discourse was characterised by a strong abolitionist sentiment which was turning its attention to the situation in the colonies after its victories in the metropole. In 1834, it succeeded in getting a Parliamentary Committee to look into the issue of slavery in the East Indies, and in getting its prohibition enacted. The most prominent territory where this legislation found impact was in the sugar producing plantation economy of the Caribbean colonies. Indrani Chatterjee has pointed out how the East India Company administrator's tendency to insist upon the rights of masters and other measures to preserve the sanctity of property served to qualify the actual workings of Act V of 1843 in India. [97] Nonetheless, it has to be kept in mind that the rhetoric of liberty was becoming an integral part of the imperial imagination, and an important justification for military and financial expansionism. With its perpetual need to bolster itself in public opinion, the East India Company could not afford to stay out of this kind of political thinking, as evident in the Court of Directors' declaration in 1830 that 'slavery in every form is peculiarly revolting to the moral feelings of Englishmen'.[98]

One recent acquisition where such British intervention seemed necessary was in the newly acquired territory of Assam, where notables had held large numbers of servile men and women, whose ranks were added to by the thousands enslaved by the Burmese invaders. The general term 'slave' used by British observers occluded such

---

[95] Guha, '"A Big Push Without A Take-Off: A Case-Study of Assam: 1871-1901": Reply to Comment', Indian Economic and Social History Review, December 1974, pp.474-9.
[96] Evidence of the planters S.E. Peal, E.P. Gilman and Haribilas Agarwala to the *Royal Commission on Opium*, 1894, Vol. 2, pp.153, 266 and 293.
[97] Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India*, New Delhi, 1999, pp.202-13.
[98] Court of Directors' Letter to Bengal, 10 March 1830, OIOC.

war captives, agrestic and domestic bondsmen, whose status was in some respects better than of the hard pressed paik since they were exempt from compulsory military service and other corvée obligations, as well as debt slaves. Company officials were to find 'astonishing the number of people who from the pressure of rent have sold themselves for a trifling sum and become bondsmen with their wives and families until the original sum which they can never have the means of realizing is obtained'.[99]

One of the first acts by David Scott, the newly appointed Agent to the Governor-General was to permit paiks to sell themselves to their creditors.[100] While this passed muster in 1825, on the eve of the Anglo-Burmese war, by the 1830s, Scott's continuation of this policy was causing frissons with his superiors. Scott was now running foul of a general emancipatory current when he proposed to continue with the precolonial system of *bandis* and *betis* cultivating the estates held by the nobility and gentry, at least until a new system could be eased into place.[101] This was justified partly on grounds of economic necessity, and more strongly, also in terms of civilisational logic.

> From the records of history, Jewish, Classical, Asiatic and European it appears that slavery has everywhere prevailed in the less advanced stages of civilisation; and I apprehend Assam, according to European notions, may be considered as a country exhibiting a still ruder state of society...Were the country further advanced in the career of improvement, and capital more widely diffused...this system of slavery and bondage would gradually diminish of itself.[102]

This was buttressed by the local administrator's conviction that the condition of the 'slaves' was not the most urgent issue that they had to worry about, since it was more or less 'comparable to the dissolute paupers in England'.[103] Such sentiments were out of place within the tide of reformist ideologies seeking to banish such vices from the body politic, both within and without the mother country.

---

[99] Foreign Political Consultations, Nos. 106-8, June 1833-6, NAI.
[100] Board's Collection F/4/1115/29887; David Scott to Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal, 4 March 1828, OIOC.
[101] Parliamentary Papers, *Papers on Slavery in the East Indies*, Vol. XXXVIII, Paper 238; Appendix VI, No. 3, Report from Law Commissioners Relative to Slavery in the East Indies; Appendix VI, No. 5; David Scott to the Chief Secretary, 10 October 1830.
[102] PP 1841; Appendix VI, No. 3, R.I.L.C., Captain Neufville's Report, 26 July 1830.
[103] Ibid.

As Scott had foreseen, the abolition of slavery was to be the most serious disruption caused by the new regime for the dangariyas of Assam.[104] 'Slavery' had played an important role in the labour-short economy of the Brahmaputra valley, with an estimated 9-10% of the population working as bondsmen, a considerable number of them on agricultural estates allotted to Ahom notables in keeping with their official rank. The British abolition virtually crippled this old Ahom aristocracy, as well as many of the Brahmin and Mahanta landowners who depended on such slaves, in the absence of a substantial section of agricultural labourers, for cultivation of their estates. The immediate aftermath of the abolition of slavery was therefore a breakup of whatever large-sized farms there had been for lack of hired labour to take the place of slaves. It is difficult to trace their subsequent fate, but it is thought that the bulk of the erstwhile slaves emerged, in due course, under the prevailing conditions of land abundance and capital shortage, as poor tenants upon estates held by the satras, for instance. However, the practice of mortgaging labour to a creditor as a means of settling one's debt continued in the countryside, unaffected by legislation.

David Scott had evinced his desire to take 'the opinion of intelligent natives' on this issue. Certainly, the available testimony from contemporary elites shows an almost unanimous opposition to this measure. Sadar Aminor Atmajivani, a memoir by the native official Harakanta Barua provides a striking picture of his attempts to convince his superiors of the ill judged nature of the abolition. He narrated how the Brahmin slaveholders of Kamrup held a protest demonstration and submitted to the authorities a thousand or so petitions seeking permission to retain their 'slaves and bondsmen', perhaps the first public mobilisation against the new colonial rulers.[105] Even a decade later, this was one of the major grievances that Maniram Barbhandar Barua's petition to Justice A.J. Moffat Mills' commission of enquiry mentioned. In his view, the first years of British rule, when they had continued with Ahom practices, had managed to maintain 'all respectable people...in honour and affluence' and 'even the hill tribes, as of old, were duly provided for.' But now, he bemoaned that those 'whose ancestors

---

[104] See Nirode K. Barooah, "David Scott and the Question of Slavery in Assam: A Case Study in British Paternalism," in Indian Economic and Social History Review, 1968, pp.179-96.
[105] Harakanta Barua, *Sadar Aminor Atmajivani* ('The Autobiography of a Sadar Amin'), Guwahati, 1930, p.41.

never lived by digging, ploughing or carrying burdens' had been reduced to such straits.[106]

The disapproval that Scott's attempts to prevent an abrupt break with an older political economy earned from Calcutta and London provides an interesting insight into nineteenth-century British attempts to extend the 'free-born Englishman's' liberty as part of the general improvement for his less fortunate brothers elsewhere in the world.[107] The colonial regime in Assam would now take pains to emphasise the contrast between the liberties it was introducing, and the despotic restrictions on individual mobility within the precolonial regime. On the occasion of a Viceregal visit, when a memorial from the inhabitants of Gauhati and Sibsagar complained of the decay of old families, it earned a crushing putdown. 'The nobility of Assam as of other parts of India was maintained chiefly by class privileges and by slavery, which are opposed to the whole spirit of British rule and the resuscitation of which would be an unmixed evil.'[108] Official reports on the "State of Public Opinion" sought to reinforce this perspective of British rule as departing from the feudal assumptions of the past, and promoting a free market. 'The upper class of the Assamese's opinion is that times are very hard for them as they cannot get servants to cultivate their lands and everything is so dear. The lower class, on the other hand, say that times are good, as they can make lots of money on tea gardens and can eat opium as much as they like.'[109] Freedom was apparently the watchword of the day, with the labour market touted to be its first beneficiary.

After mid century, a section of the new colonial intelligentsia sought to associate itself with this state-sponsored rhetoric of liberty and equality. [110] In "Agor Din, Etiyar Din" ('Those days, these days') Gunabhiram Barua spelt out what was to him the most significant difference between the old and the new orders. 'According to the present laws of the land, the grihastya and the ghulam enjoy the same status. Talented people,

---

[106] Mills, *Report*, Petition from Moneeram, p.605.
[107] C.A. Bayly, "The Second British Empire," in Robin W. Winks ed., *Historiography: The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Oxford, 1999, p.54.
[108] Home Public Proceedings 'A', Nos. 182-3, March 1875; From the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, NAI.
[109] Note on the State of Public Opinion; Letters to Government, No. 664, November 1877, ASA.
[110] Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, Cambridge 1995, p.81, for a comparison with Munshi Abdullah and his stress on liberty in the Malay context.

even if of low caste, have received high rank. In this regard, older people look at the Ahom days and say, This could not happen in the old days'.[111] In his evidence in 1888 on the "Material and Moral condition of the Assamese people", he summed up the situation in a similar vein.

> The descendants of old houses are, on account of their laziness and indifference, being absorbed in the general population...The lower or labouring class on the other hand benefited by the change of government. All along they were merely labourers. Formerly they worked but the work did not give them anything except satisfying their wants. At present when they work they get something which they can see and enjoy...They see that by payment of the revenue, they stand on an equal footing with those who were their masters. Compulsory labour has been abolished, and the people who have not yet forgotten the hardship of such labour, have at once sought and found ease.[112]

We find here that Gunabhiram was subtly aligning the values of his own class away from the lotus-eating aristocrats towards the general run of the *sadharan*, the ordinary people. By championing the latter, this intelligentsia was distancing itself from the old order, and placing its own claims to participating in a new 'meritocracy'. Unlike the Indo-Persian aristocracy of Northern India who had bitterly and vociferously recorded the rise of social upstarts, Ahom grandees lacked both the numbers and the cultural equipment to write their decline into history. Maniram's laments and the pathetic begging letters for pensions from sundry dangariyas remained their only monument.[113] In contrast, the old service gentry was able to consolidate itself, through its scribal skills, as a new intelligentsia which would, in its first years, proclaim the merits of its colonial masters.[114] The colonial economy's rhetoric of a free market was being buttressed by these vernacular publicists trumpeting their access to new opportunities for achieved status, through the medium of the new public culture.

---

[111] Gunabhiram Barua, "Agor Din, Etiyar Din (Pratham Adhyay)" in Assam Bandhu, Vol. 1, 1885.
[112] Note on the Condition of the People of Assam (in reply to confidential circular issued by Government of India); Note by Rai Gunabhiram Sarma Borua Bahadur, Extra-Assistant Commissioner, Nowgong, Assam Secretariat File 824 R, 1888, ASA.
[113] See Mills' *Report* for some examples of such petitions, pp.641-3. Also Harakanta Barua's account in his *Atmajivani* of his assistance to Ghanakanta Singha and his wife in such attempts.
[114] For an account of a parallel sensibility, see Biswamoy Pati, "The 'High': 'Low' D ialectic in Fakirmohana's Chamana Athaguntha: Popular Culture, Literature and Society in Late Nineteenth century Orissa," Research in Progress Papers, History and Society, 2nd series, No. LXIX, NMML, New Delhi, 1993.

However, it would be inaccurate to see this indigenous public as a monolithic one, or even as consistent in its desires and aspirations. We see it oscillating, for instance, between the desire to distance itself from the chaotic last decades of Ahom rule and a growing need for nostalgia, the valorisation of the local in the face of condescending outsiders. Thus, we have Gunabhiram's cousin and mentor Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, introducing a distinction between Assamese society and that of other parts of India, in terms of the former's egalitarian essence.

> Every ryot in Assam is the absolute master of his own lands, from which he is never liable to be ousted until he relinquishes it of his own free will...The Assamese, one and all, from the poorest peasant to the nobility of the country, are devoted to agricultural pursuits. In ancient times, the sovereigns themselves had their private farms. In Bengal and other parts of India, tillage is exclusively the occupation of the cultivating class. There is, however, not a single family in Assam that is not engaged in the culture of lands, and every family provides itself by agriculture with almost all the necessaries of life.[115]

In a period when the caste Hindu gentry of this frontier territory was increasingly sensitive to the opinions of their peers from other regions, this was an assertion of difference and superiority, using the yardsticks of liberty and progress that colonial discourse had supplied to judge a society. By implication, Anandaram and Gunabhiram were distancing the people of Assam from the servitude and despotism that their rulers might have imposed, and thereby, asserting their suitability for British sponsored unnati. In addition, an implicit contrast was sought with neighbouring Bengal, whose clerical cadres had accompanied the British regime, providing not just administrative skills but also assertions of relative cultural superiority. In a period when the Bengal zamindari system and its enshrinement by the Permanent Settlement was coming under criticism, Anandaram seized the opportunity to adduce its absence in Assam as a signifier of innate progressiveness.

In the rhetoric of these publicists, the British regime was depicted as an agency for deliverance, one that would recognise the egalitarian essence of Assam and take measures to preserve it. Utilitarian arguments clearly had an influence upon Anandaram, shown in his condemnation of the Bengal settlement for social inequity and economic stagnation. Thereby, 'preservation of the ancient Ryotwarree system in

[115] Mills, *Report*, Observations by Anundaram, p102-3.

Assam and the recognition of the ryots rights as proprietors of their respective holdings' was the greatest boon British rule could offer. He advocated a revenue system, which would lay the foundation for progressive improvements by holding out reasonable encouragement to those managing lands, and obviate the 'mischiefs' of a permanent settlement. 'The introduction of improvements in the art of agriculture' was the only way to 'increase the general resources of the country, ameliorate the condition of the people, raise them to wealth or affluence, advance manufactures or commerce, teach the Assamese the arts and luxuries of civilised life.' Interestingly, he appeared to have adopted notions of climatic traits as distinguishing particular lands. Since 'the soil of Assam is adapted to the productions both of the torrid and temperate regions', he predicted a glowing future for agrarian initiatives, especially for commercial products. 'Silk, cotton, tea, and a variety of other valuable products grow luxuriantly in her fields and valleys, and it requires only the introduction of an improved method of agriculture to render her produce tenfold more abundant.'[116] The local peasant required guidance from outside agency, but once that was provided would be able to contribute fully to the new order.

Such proposals were not far removed from the arguments in agrarian patriotic vein that came from many British officials. By the 1850s, Scott's successor, Francis Jenkins as well as the indigenous magistrate Anandaram both had begun to advocate a prominent role for European settlers in this task of improvement but they diverged in the attitudes they took towards local enterprise. Contrary to Jenkins' opinion, but following in the direction previously taken by his illustrious Bengal predecessor, Rammohun Roy, Anandaram aspired to a future of British-Indian partnership. But contrary to his hopes, the land revenue system that the British subsequently established in Assam was based upon the assumption that 'natives have no capital and their only resource is to settle other ryots to settle in these grants so that as much or even more becomes waste in one place than is reclaimed in the other'.[117] The Wastelands Rules as revised after Justice Mills' recommendations in 1854, did not expressly discriminate against local applicants but their requirements implicitly meant that only Europeans could avail of the concessions. Even the well-connected

---

[116] Ibid.
[117] Mills, *Report*, p.16.

Maniram had to pay a substantial amount as land revenue for the land he brought under his two plantations in 1841, in contrast to the free land grants given to the Assam Company. Rather than Anandaram's vision of European capital and expertise opening the way for local enterprise to improve the country at large, it was the profitable cash crop sector, which was to be promoted by entrusting it to the former. The rest of the agricultural economy would be left to the tender mercies of market and revenue collection mechanisms.

When we juxtapose Anandaram's and Gunabhiram's views, with the thirty years separating them, it becomes clear that the latter no longer could envisage the same roseate possibilities of agrarian entrepreneurship for natives. Superficially, they shared the same rhetoric of the Assamese cultivator as the lynchpin of society. But by the closing decades of the nineteenth century, Gunabhiram's free peasant primarily served as a rhetorical device to illustrate the opportunities for mobility that he depicted British rule as providing. In the cold light of reality, these were severely restricted, essentially consisting of a narrow range of clerical jobs in government and tea garden offices. The post of Extra Assistant Commissioner that he retired upon was the highest that most natives could as yet aspire to. Even these openings, far from being flung wide open to people of 'low caste' as Gunabhiram claims, tended to be supplied from within the ranks of the established service gentry, predominantly upper caste families.

The rosy prospects that Anandaram had held out for an indigenous improving class actively participating in the region's economic modernisation were well-nigh impossible to realise in the face of government indifference, at best, and active obstruction, at worst. This is not to say that natives did not venture into the new Mecca of tea enterprise, many did so, with indifferent success, and abandoned it when the going got too difficult.[118] After the difficult decade of the 1860s, a government official observed that 'a large number of respectable natives burnt their fingers in tea

[118] However, some natives appear to have weathered the crisis or at least hung on for a few more years. In 1876, Rudram Bardoloi, then a Seristadar in the Diwani Court at Nowgong, was cited in government correspondence as the owner of a tea garden in the district. A number of other native officials seem to have dabbled in such enterprises, one of the few who achieved long term success was Jagannath Baruah. See Jogendranath Bhuyan, *Unnisso Satikar Asom-Sangbad*, Dibrugarh, 1998, p.156.

speculation and have been shy of retiring into any other since'.[119] Their situation is clear from the career of the premier Assamese planter family, the Khongiya Baruahs, whose founder Bisturam and his son Siva Prasad both flourished through their close ties with the managing agency firm of Williamson, Magor and Co. Like other indigenous planters, Bisturam began by supplying seeds to the big European concerns, using his status as mouzadar of Thengal to bring Kachari peasants to work the small tea garden he set up on his family land. Indeed, his biographer claims that it was that ready availability of Kachari labour that prompted him to establish his first plantation in that area. Such small native concerns did not have the resources to set up their own factories, they functioned as subsidiary concerns of the European gardens to whom they had to send their leaves for processing. Bisturam's fortunes began to take a better turn than for most of his compatriots when Williamson helped him set up his own factory with their outdated equipment at a throwaway price.[120] Another prominent native entrepreneur, Haribilas Agarwala (1842-1916) whose fortune was based upon a lucrative opium trade, had begun to interest himself in tea from 1868, but it was only in 1914 that he acquired the Tamulbari plantation that would be the flagstaff of his family's career as a tea planter dynasty.[121]

By distancing themselves from the despotic structures of the old order, Gunabhiram and his peers were positioning themselves as a self-consciously modern class. This was went hand in hand with a rewriting of the past, of appropriating elements of the Ahom past which could buttress the 'modern' identities that were being imagined. For this intelligentsia, it was a necessary rhetorical device to stress its affinity with an ordinary peasant population, to position itself as the latter's champions. At one level, this was done through use of the convenient catchword 'ryot' which served to elide the distinctions of caste and class within its bounds. While the Assamese gentry was moving into urban employment and residence, it still maintained a base in the countryside.[122] The Brahmin and other groups who had seemingly lost their labour

---

[119] Agriculture and Revenue Records, Letter No. 267, 15 December 1870; to the Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar, as part of answers to questions for the Bengal Gazetteers, DRO.
[120] Arup Kumar Dutta, *The Khongiya Baruahs of Thengal*, Guwahati, 1990, pp.27-8. It is worth remembering that the Khongiya Baruah family broke loose from their patron-client relationship with this managing agency house only in the 1970s.
[121] See Iswar Chandra Choudhury, *Jyotiprasad Agarwala*, Delhi, 1986 and Timberg, *The Marwaris*.
[122] In the 1872-3 'Register of Lands and Houses owned by Ministerial Officers in the District', the Seristadar Rudram Bordoloi held pattas for 45 bighas in the Haiborgaon mouza of Nowgong as well as

force with the abolition of slavery, moved on to other arrangements for their lands, mostly with groups of sharecroppers.[123] While polarities of landlord and tenant were not very stark in a situation of relative land abundance, the cosy egalitarianism and the amicable relationship with the colonial state ~~for the peasant~~ that Gunabhiram portrayed was not the reality, either. In the virtual absence of other sources, we have to fall back on the occasional moment when state and peasant came into violent conflict to gain an insight into the less than seamless fit between colonial demands, intelligentsia aspirations and peasant livelihood. The only Brahmaputra valley newspaper of this period (however short lived), the Assam News struck a different note from Gunabhiram in 1883, by bemoaning 'How well off the people were in the old days of the Assam Rajas. The rulers were happy whenever the ryots were so, but now there is no end of trouble to the latter, whereas the rulers are at the height of their enjoyment'.[124] This sentiment emerged at the tail end of its report on the intrusive way in which the government was operating in the countryside. 'Lately an official was down in the plains, and enquired what the ryots cultivate and what the proportion of produce is which they get...The ignorant ryots are alarmed.'[125]

Those officials, as it turned out, were preparing the way for the Assam valley's first cadastral survey between 1883-93, which introduced a massive increase of nearly 53% over earlier rates and produced unprecedented peasant unrest, directed against both the state machinery and the Marwari moneylenders seen as its allies.[126] The term ryot was being strategically deployed within the new associational culture of the middle classes, with the Tezpur Ryot Sabha and the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha protesting against revenue increase, maintaining that although they were better off than they were after the Burmese devastation, the condition of the people had grown much worse. 'Otherwise the culturable land would not have remained fallow till the closing years of the century'.[127] For the two key figures active in these associations,

---

smaller plots in other mouzas. It must have been on such land that he set up the tea garden that the document mentions. Quoted by Bhuyan, *Unnisso Satikar Asom-Sangbad*, p.157.

[123] The Auniati and Dakhinpat Gosains, the largest land owners in the Assam valley continued to hold their estates on the island of Majuli, cultivated mostly by Miri tribal peasantry.

[124] Assam News, 29 December 1883 in RNP, 1883. A bilingual weekly from Guwahati edited for some time by Hemchandra Barua of *Hem Kosha* dictionary fame.

[125] Ibid.

[126] See *Assam Valley Re-assessment Report*, Shillong, 1893.

[127] Jatindranath Goswami, *Jaganath Baruar Jivani*, Jorhat, 1975, p.12. Also, Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, Delhi, 1977, p.51.

Haribilas Agarwala and Jagannath Barua (1851-1907), their identity as ryot stemmed from their role as pioneering native tea planters. Unlike their British counterparts, their holdings were not large enough to give them the advantage of concessional land tenures, and any revenue increase would have adversely affected them. This also explains why in the 1890s, such men opposed the prospect of a government ban on opium, fearing that the revenue shortfall would come as an additional tax burden.

2 (6) Coolie Servitude and British Rule

It is a significant point to remember, however, that occasional spats with the state for this elite did not, as yet, disturb their essential belief in the unnati it was capable of ushering in. Until the end of the nineteenth century, most Assamese advocates of unnati would concur in the assumption that British rule in Assam had replaced precolonial slavery with free labour. Ostensibly it was so, but the new reality was an indentured system, which concealed semi-feudal modes of coercion under the guise of capitalist rationality. A growing body of opinion was drawing attention to this, but its defenders were staunch in its support, claiming that it was making a special contribution to the amelioration of the peasant. This was in stark contrast to the opinions expressed by the Bengal vernacular press, based upon the findings by reformers such as Dwarkanath Ganguli, Assistant Secretary of the Indian Association.[128] They had found a plantation system iniquitous in its violence and oppression, giving them no option but to revert to metaphors of bondage to expose it. The very title of Ganguli's account, Slavery and British Dominion, was a pointed rebuttal of the libertarian pretensions of the colonial rulers. Rather than the idyllic picture of Edenic redemption that colonialism was providing, it was horrific accounts of coolie oppression on its gardens that comprised the most frequent references to Assam in the metropolis of Calcutta.[129]

An integral part of the penal regime that tea planters administered was an arbitrary practice of torture, with enquiries unearthing its practice of flogging recalcitrant workers even into death, rubbing pepper into the sexual organs of female coolies, all

[128] Dwarkanath Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (a collection of thirteen articles first published in the Bengalee, September 1886 to April 1887), Calcutta, 1972.
[129] Almost every volume of the RNP for the Bengal Presidency from the 1870s onwards provides such accounts.

testimony to the ultimate dehumanisation of this commodity. The extent of this 'culture of terror' was such that contemporary British administrators themselves would have to admit its truth. After his retirement, Bamfylde Fuller was to write, 'I came across notices posted at river ferries and railway stations describing runaway coolies and offering rewards for their apprehension, that reminded one of Uncle Tom's Cabin.'[130] His predecessor as Chief Commissioner, the liberal minded Henry Cotton had earned the lasting enmity of the planters' lobby by his condemnation of the 'tale of misery and wrong' that he had encountered while writing the Labour Report in 1900.[131] However, it has to be kept in mind that while such metaphors of slavery and forced servitude conveyed the shock felt even by upholders of the White Man's Burden, they cannot be taken as exact descriptions of a production regime. A young planter, Alick Carnegie wrote in his letters home, in the 1860s, 'We had awful work driving the coolies, we drove up and down the line and had to shove them on exactly as nigger drivers in America.'[132] As Ann Stoler points out, these metaphors might describe the tenor of the labour system and evoke the physical and social violence involved but they do not define the productive relations themselves. These workers were subject to a harsh penal code, but this was only one aspect of the coercive apparatus and even when indenture and penal labour were abolished, various extra economic forms of coercion continued within late colonial capitalism, and often, beyond.[133]

However, within the region itself, the coolie as slave, evoked quite a different response, from both its elites and peasants. An interesting contribution to this indigenous discourse appears from the statements made by local peasants, especially at moments when they faced state demands for their labour. As one District Commissioner exasperatedly observed, 'The inhabitants stated they were poor...(but) could not do 'cooly work' as they were respectable people in the Raja's time.'[134] In the Kamrup district, Pura Borkalita elaborated upon this theme of respectability. 'We do not carry loads for others, we are *bhal manuh* ('respectable men'). We do not mind carrying our own rice or water or mustard banghy fashion on our shoulders but we

---

[130] Bampfylde J. Fuller, *Some Personal Experiences*, London, 1930.
[131] H.J. Cotton, *Indian and Home Memories*, London, 1911, pp.264-5.
[132] Letter from Alick Carnegie, undated, OIOC Mss. Eur. D 682.
[133] Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation*, p.28.
[134] "Tour Diary of Deputy Commissioner," 1898, DRO.

cannot do this for hire.' However, he did acknowledge that at times, they did carry out such tasks for wages. 'We sometimes do earthwork or build reed houses or put on thatch. We do this for the big men of the village, we do not work for Government at all. If we did we should be considered coolies, whereas we are respectable men.'[135] The 1881 census reported rumours that inhabitants of thickly populated districts would be seized upon by its officials and sent to cultivate its waste tracts. Such evidence of local aversion to its work regime was attributed by the state to the lingering effects of the exaction of forced labour from paiks by its Ahom predecessor. But Borkalita's response reveals that by now, locals shunned 'cooly work' by virtue of its new associations, not the old. Manual labour for Government and Planter now involved a diminution of status because of its links with the region's new inhabitant, the Dhangar/Coolie.

Like plantation societies elsewhere, this tea regime had sparked off a process whereby 'coolie' was becoming a racial as much as an economic category. A Labour Enquiry Committee in 1906 found that 'the contractors are up to all manner of tricks to pass off inferior coolies as first class labourers; they make them dress their hair on one side and stain their skins so as to look like aboriginals'.[136] While circumstances did dictate the occasional involvement of local groups with plantation work, the elision of Dhangar and Coolie meant that the natives of Assam would attempt to retain a distance from being conflated with that category. What needs to be kept in mind is that despite the colonial disparaging of local labour, Assam peasants continued to be engaged for specific, temporary tasks on tea gardens, especially to open up new ones, even at the height of imported labour.[137] Despite their dislike of the regimented plantation system, the sluggish nature of the rice market and the prohibition on opium cultivation meant that such work was frequently the peasantry's only option to meet urgent cash requirements. However, this only crystallised social prejudice against

---

[135] Ibid.

[136] *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*, p.24.

[137] Ramsden, *Assam Planter*, p.128. Similarly, in the Dutch run Asian plantation economy of Deli, local Bataks and Malays were employed in clearing the jungles. This did not disturb the general construction of the 'lazy native' since racial explanations were readily available to explain the willingness of local peasants to perform such tasks, though not the regimented plantation labour. See Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast*, p.92.

coolie work and by extension, that migrant population which depended upon it for a living. [138]

Unlike other recent migrants from other parts of India such as the Marwari traders and Bengali clerks, the Dhangar had very few options to attain economic mobility or social respectability in his new exiled life.[139] The performance of seasonal work by locals did not run this risk, it was only the permanent workers under indenture or penal contract who were inscribed as coolie.[140] The peasantry in neighbouring villages had little chance of mixing with these 'garden coolies', not just due to the differences of culture and language but more so because of the deliberate policies of the planters to prevent their labour from acquiring a bolthole for escape.[141] These 'divide and rule' policies seem to have been very successful, with the local peasants usually regarding the coolies in their vicinity as a captive market to fleece with inflated prices for rice, whose conditions of life were to be avoided as far as possible. [142] An Assamese folk song reveals such a sentiment with its dialogue between a pair of lovers, where the man was setting off to work on a tea garden and his sweetheart begged him not to go to such a place where 'there is not a bit of happiness' to be found. [143] Its subsequent lines, which disdainfully depicted coolie women in salacious union with the 'sahibs',[144] only served to emphasise the social prejudices local respectability was generating for the newcomers in its midst.

---

[138] Sinhalese villagers expressed similar anxieties about the dangers of their being conflated with 'low-caste' coolies, as a chief headman, Mahawalatenne's statement made clear, in a report attached to the Census of Ceylon for 1901. Quoted by Eric Meyer, " 'Enclave' Plantations, 'Hemmed-In' Villages and Dualistic Representations in Colonial Ceylon," in Daniel, Bernstein and Brass ed., *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants*, p.219.

[139] An education official noted in 1876 that 'It is very seldom that planters...take any interest in the education of their coolies...with very rare exceptions they are of the opinion that it is against their advantage to have their coolies taught the art of reading and writing'. C.A. Martin, *General Report on Public Instruction in Assam,* 1877-78, Shillong, 1879, p.6.

[140] Other groups among the coolie work force in Assam came from the eastern part of the United Provinces, parts of the Central Provinces, and the districts of Ganjam and Vishakapatnam in the Madras Presidency.

[141] As the Royal Commission on Labour in India noted, contact with the outside world for garden coolies was prohibited, with chowkidars making the rounds of their quarters at night. The 'coolie lines' and most of the estate roads were private property with outsiders strictly kept out. See *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India*, Vol. 6, Part 1, London, 1930, p.376.

[142] See *Assam Administrative Reports*, annual series, Shillong.

[143] Prafulladatta Goswami, *Bihu Songs from Assam*, Guwahati, 1988, p.201.

[144] Ibid.

While tea itself came to be widely consumed in the Assamese caste Hindu home only by the early years of the twentieth century, its production had begun to involve local elites with the crop and its producers, from much earlier on.[145] The census reports detail how 'native enumerators' refused to enter coolies as Hindus, but clumped them as Christians or Animists impartially, for, they said, 'they eat anything.'[146] Apart from this distaste towards 'impure' lifestyles, there was concrete distance, and antagonism between the tribal labourer and the caste Hindu who disciplined him as the *mohurir* ('clerical or field employee') of the garden's sahibs. While Assamese planter-entrepreneurs did not meet with much success until the twentieth century, from the 1870s onwards, the newly educated middle classes had begun to vie with their Bengali counterparts for clerical posts on the plantations.[147] One of their number, Someswar Sarma even produced a traditional style verse panegyric to the Assam Company, Assam Companir Biboron ('Description of the Assam Company'), which is notable for its grovelling praise of its gardens' picturesque beauty, in complete disregard of the wretched reality of the coolie lines.[148] The plantation managed by A.R. Ramsden employed five mohurirs, all 'Assamese and agriculturists by birth' supervising its three thousand strong coolie force at a pay averaging one rupee a day as well as a monthly commission 'on the payment for work done by those they supervise'.[149] As we have seen, it was a few members of this supervisory class, supplemented by mouzadars and babus in government service, who established their own small gardens from the 1870s onwards. The descendants of those pioneering indigenous planters claim that they used local villagers as labour, and were not

---

[145] See Benudhar Sarma's autobiography, Jogeswar Sarma ed., *Benudhar Sarmar Rasanavali*, Vol. 1: *Mojiyar Pora Mejoloi*, Guwahati, 1985, p.21. Though Lakshminath Bezbarua in his memoir of his childhood mentions tea being offered to visitors in his boyhood home, the aristocratic lifestyle of the Bezbaruas made it an exception, Benudhar's poor Brahmin home was more the norm even among this provincial intelligentsia. Clearly, the fashion for tea was widely prevalent in urban centres such as Calcutta, as is evident from the genesis of the ASL Club or Literary Society in the 1870s among Assamese students there from a 'Tea Party' circle. See Lakshminath Bezbarua, *Mor Jivan Sowaran*, Guwahati, 1944, pp.37-48. However, by the 1920s, tea was also being offered for sale at public palces in some towns, as in the bustling commercial mart of Bara Bazaar in Shillong, with no less than 40 tea-stalls operated by Khasi women traders. See G.T. Lloyd, *Census of India, 1921*: Vol. 3: Assam: Part 1, *Report*, Shillong, 1923, p.167.

[146] *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*, Calcutta 1883, p.10.

[147] Between 1876 and 1878, 26 students from the Assam valley schools joined the plantations as mohurirs, at a starting salary of Rs 20 per month. Even earlier, it was noted to be 'a general complaint of the gurus that many of their pupils, when raised to the higher section, leave the pathsalas in order to get appointments as mohurirs in tea gardens'. *General Reports on Public Instruction in Assam, 1876-77* and *1877-78*, Shillong, 1878 and 1879.

[148] Someswar Sarma, *Assam Companir Biboron*, Sibsagar, 1875.

[149] Ramsden, *Assam Planter*, p.24.

involved in the horrendous treatment of imported coolies.[150] However, a quasi-feudal logic of a different order might have operated there, as illustrated by Bisturam Barooah's biography, which narrates how his powers as a mouzadar in the Kachari inhabited Thengal area allowed him to extract virtually unpaid labour from there for his gardens. [151]

Until the last years of the nineteenth century, publicists such as Gunabhiram were notably silent upon the 'new slavery' that tea unnati had ushered in, preferring instead to exalt the intrinsic egalitarianism in Assamese society, which the British promotion of achieved over inherited status was advancing. In 1885, the Assamese periodical Mau published a piece by Bolinarayan Bora that graphically illustrates how a portion of the region's new intelligentsia felt about the interlopers into the homeland.

> Reader, listen, to what manner of creature the coolie is, and how it lives. That whose body hue is blacker than the darkest hour of the night, whose teeth are whiter than even pounded rice, in whose home are to be found bird, pig, and dog, in whose hand is a bilayati ['foreign'] umbrella, and in whose hands are held a hoe and basket among the tea bushes, that is what is called a coolie.[152]

What Tony Ballantyne and others have called the delusion of Aryanism then overtaking Indian elites is clearly visible in this distancing of his readers from the dark skinned migrants they would encounter in the Assam countryside.[153] The tone of the piece was deliberately crafted so as to delineate the coolie into animal status, by delineating quasi-zoological attributes for him. At the same time, it went on to pour ridicule on the coolie's lifestyle, his use of Western attire alongside his unclean living conditions.

It is instructive to pick out one particular reference here, Bolinarayan's scorn of his subjects' use of an umbrella, which interestingly anticipates a later fracas between

---

[150] Personal communication from Meenakshi Chaliha, daughter of a well known Assamese planter-entrepreneur, Jadav Prasad Chaliha, July 2000. The Chaliha family were active in the Gandhian nationalist program, and provided the latter's younger brother, Bimala Prasad was to become Chief Minister of independent Assam.

[151] Bisturam Barooah's ties with this labour force was a complex one, its patron-client overtones appearing for instance, in his patronage of the emergent Kachari Sabhas leading to his being given the title of 'Kachari Raja' by the educated young men who organised such 'improving' efforts. See Arup Kumar Dutta, *The Khongiya Baruahs*, pp.42-3.

[152] Bolinarayan Bora, "Sah Bagisar Kuli" ('The Tea Garden Coolie'), in Haranarayan Bora ed., Mau or The Bee, February 1887.

[153] Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, Hampshire, 2002.

coolie and management. In July 1903, the coolies on Rowmari garden rose in a body and attacked their European and Indian superiors, ostensibly from anger at their umbrellas being confiscated to force them to use the local japi ('broad brimmed straw hat to keep off rain and sun') instead. The employers' reason for this action was that while the latter allowed both hands free to pluck leaves, the umbrella had to be held by one hand.[154] While this use of the umbrella certainly seems to be part of a passive resistance by the coolie to the speeded up production regime imposed upon them by the planters, this incident takes on added significance when juxtaposed with Bolinarayan's earlier adumbrations on its use. Clearly, the consumption of this foreign item as opposed to the locally produced japi that the Assamese peasant used, was viewed as an important signifier of the coolie's externality to indigenous society. Perhaps the enquiry committee's suggestion that considerations of prestige were involved for the coolie in the issue of umbrella vs. japi was not so far wrong.

Of course, Bolinarayan's distasteful invective was at least partly reflective of yet another strand of opinion among this Assamese elite, the faith in the modernity which tea represented for their land. Its Bengali counterparts had seized on tea oppression as the successor to the indigo issue to flagellate colonial policy on irreproachably humanitarian grounds. For the Calcutta public, horror at Ramkumar Vidyaratna and Dwarkanath Ganguli's first hand reports,[155] and their follow-ups in the vernacular press was strengthened by plays staged about planter atrocities.[156] Though the Brahmaputra Valley newspaper, the Assam News did run occasional reports on the inconveniences suffered by locals when they were mistakenly impressed for labour, on the whole, the Assamese elite did not, as yet, forthrightly condemn the plantation system.[157] In the Mau essay by Bolinarayan, his condemnation of 'our newspaper writing friend of the coolie, the Bengali babu' expressed the tension between two

---

[154] Emigration Proceedings 'A', No.11, November 1903, NAI.

[155] Ramkumar Vidyaratna of the Brahmo Samaj who was in charge of the Assam Tea Plantation area for missionary work, paid a visit to the province, at the aegis of Debendranath Tagore. He published his account of coolies in Calcutta papers such as the Sanjivini, which was later published as *Udeshi Satya Srabar Assam Bhraman*. See Dwarkanath Ganguli, *Slavery*, Introduction.

[156] There was a proliferation of plays in Calcutta attacking oppression by white planters in the 1860s and 1870s, the best known being *Nildarpan* ('The Mirror of the Indigo Planter') and another being *Chakardarpan* ('The Mirror of the Tea Planter'). Rajat Kanta Ray, ed., *Mind, Body and Society*, Delhi, 1995, p.9.

[157] Lakshminath Bezbarua wrote a strong rejoinder, "Kuli," to Bolinarayan's piece, which was published with the latter appending his own arguments to it, Mau, March 1887.

sections of the colonial intelligentsia, one of which saw itself as very much the weaker and the colonial state as still representing its best possibility for progress.[158]

Between 1908 and 1926, the penal contract and indentured labour system gradually came to an end, with its contradictions becoming more visible, and forcing the state to take action to ensure a long term viability of the plantation sector. The high mortality and desertion, coupled with the low fertility rates had served only to raise the real costs of labour, despite the low wages forced upon it.[159] With a new goal of encouraging a permanent work force in the tea areas, planter reluctance to loose controls over the work force had to be done away with. Large numbers of time-expired coolies were now allowed to settle down in villages adjoining the tea gardens, on land leased from government, plantations, or even local villagers. The 1901 census showed up the immense rise in the numbers of cultivating tenants, attributed to the 'practice which is growing up among the Assamese of leasing out the land lying near a tea garden to the coolies'.[160] Gradually, coolie contact with local society was becoming less abrasive. One index of the shift in this relationship appears in early-twentieth century census enumerators, unlike their predecessors, accepting the 'garden baat' of the tea labour as a new form of the Assamese language.[161]

Over the same period, the intelligentsia's faith in the improving agenda of British knowledge and capital was gradually dissipating, in tune with a growing resentment of the arrogant tea lobby. Its close links with the state had ensured a powerful political presence for this 'most powerful landed and commercial interest', whose characterisation as the 'one progressive and improving element in non-official society' had given tea -planters half of the non-official seats in the local boards and

---

[158] See Peter Robb's discussion about the expectation of progress created by the state vis-a-vis colonial elites in "The Colonial State and Constructions of Indian Identity: An Example on the Northeast Frontier in the 1880s", Modern Asian Studies. 31 (2), 1997, p.251.

[159] The Royal Commission on Labour found in 1930 that plantation owners, at least in theory, gave female workers half-pay for a period before and after the birth of a child and a lump-sum cash bonus. The only reason why they should be solicitous of the welfare of pregnant women when they were in general so callous of workers' health seems to be the general concern by now with reproduction of the labour force. It also has to be kept in mind that coolie women, in a manner reminiscent of slaves in the United States, had been characterised by a disproportionate number of abortions, with local dais often serving as abortionists outside the jurisdiction of the plantation itself. Geraldine Forbes, "Managing Midwifery in India," in Dagmar Engels and Shula Marks ed., *Contesting Colonial Hegemony*, London, 1994, p.165.

[160] B.C. Allen, *Census of India, 1901: Vol. 4: Assam: Part 1, Report*, Shillong, 1902, pp.162-3.

[161] C.S. Mullen, *Report on Census of Assam, 1931: Vol. 3, Assam: Part 1, Report*, Shillong, 1932, p.188.

later, considerable clout in the new legislative assembly.[162] At the ground level, this power expressed itself in a quasi-feudal regime extending beyond the boundaries of the plantations, where natives, irrespective of status, were prohibited from moving freely or using umbrellas or vehicles in the presence of a planter.[163] In this climate, the attitude towards the coolie was softening into a patronising paternalism, illustrated vividly in the heyday of Gandhian mobilisation in the 1920s, when the Assamese intelligentsia ventured into the villages and tea gardens as part of their new nationalist agenda of regeneration.[164] Nonetheless, rather than contesting the myth of the lazy peasant and the parallel one of the intemperate coolie, the intelligentsia implicitly accepted those characterisations for these groups that they now sought to reclaim. Where both these characterisations were brought together was in that other colonial commodity, opium. This 'curse of Assam' now became the keystone of the Congress campaign, with its eradication a suitable entry point to 'uplift' both the garden coolie and the tribal peasant.[165] With a new wave of migrants in the form of the Muslim peasants from East Bengal entering Assam, the *baganiyas* ('garden people') seemed much less of a political and cultural threat for a self-consciously Hindu strand of Assamese nationalism.

Conclusion

Despite the intriguing similarities in the methods of violence and coercion within enclaves of colonial production ranging from the tea estates of Assam to the rubber plantations in Indo-China and the mining enterprises in the Belgian Congo, there have been surprisingly few attempts to provide a comparative perspective on their workings. This chapter has made an effort to locate the trajectory of colonial

---

[162] *Assam Administrative Report, 1882-3*, Shillong, 1884, ii.

[163] The Reis and Raiyyats, 3 November 1883 and The Mussalman, 14 September 1926; File of newspaper cuttings, ASA.

[164] Benudhar Sarma's account in *Congressor Kasiyali Rodot*, Guwahati, 1959. Also report in The Mussalman, 25 February 1921 about the Gauhati Pleaders' Association's decision, initiated by the lawyer and planter Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, to suspend practice for three days to protest against the inhuman treatment of coolies at Chandpur.

[165] Benudhar Sarma's *Congressor Kasiyali Rodot* describes such anti-opium propaganda as the main issue they took up in villages and plantations. From the 1920s, the gradual involvement of local intelligentsia with state institutions also allowed this project to be taken up through official channels. For instance, in 1928 the Public Health Department printed three leaflets in Assamese on the evils of opium and circulated them widely through civil surgeons, local boards, municipalities as well as by sending them to the editors of the Assamiya and the Assam Banti papers. Cited in *Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council*, 12 March 1929, Vol. 9, No. 4, Shillong, 1929, p.400.

capitalism in Assam within a larger framework of recent works on 'plantation studies' which have illuminated the centrality of this late-nineteenth century phenomenon for colonial and post-colonial historiography.[166]

Tea's quest for labour had an enduring impact upon the social identities emerging in Assam, as racial typologies and commercialisation interacted to make the coolie an inescapable, yet uncomfortable addition to Assam's social landscape. The same quest had naturalised the local Assamese into an archetype of the indolent opium eating native, and it was the reformist impulse to contest this which allowed the intelligentsia an opening to portray itself the saviour of peasant and coolie alike.

Therefore, this chapter has tried to address a lacuna in existing historiography, in regarding it as crucial to integrate the processes of this 'enclave sector' within the cultural identity of the region.[167] The most visible impact of this form of industrial agriculture was in its reordering of the natural environment, with the political and economic ascendancy bestowed upon the Planters' Raj evident in the lush green symmetries of its physical environment and its spatial separation from the rest of the countryside serving as a constant reminder of its social, ecological and historical rending from its environs. It has tried to show that while the immediate mastery of the white man came to be contested by a temporary alliance between coolie and local, the ultimate logic of the plantation system was not. Tea enterprise would remain the great white hope for economic progress, and for the Indian planter who would inherit the gardens and coolies of Assam.[168]

---

[166] Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast*, xiii.

[167] An encouraging beginning was made here by Eric Meyer's " 'Enclave' Plantations, 'Hemmed-In' Villages and Dualistic Representations in Colonial Ceylon," in Daniel, Bernstein and Brass ed., *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants*, pp.199-228.

[168] While a small number of Assamese tea entrepreneurs managed to emerge as prominent tea planters in post-colonial India, the bulk of the tea industry shifted smoothly from the hands of British managing agency houses to that of Marwari capital, with headquarters continuing to be at Calcutta. This continues to be an emotive issue for Assamese nationalism, with frequent attacks upon this 'Calcutta neo-imperialism' both by the regional press as well from insurgent groups such as the ULFA. An interesting recent trend has been government legislation allowing small cultivators to grow tea on their smallholdings, though they still are dependent upon the tea garden managements for access to processing and marketing.

III Lords of the Land: Old and New

Introduction

This chapter examines the cultural encounters between local elites and the emerging British imperium in Assam with a view to analysing the symbolic dimensions of the region's transition between regimes. The East India Company had entered the region in the aftermath of the First Anglo-Burmese war, but a 'mature colonial system' emerged only in the decades following 1857 and the Company's replacement by the Crown. A theory of authority was now being codified, based on ideas and assumptions about the proper ordering of Indian society, and the relationship of its constituents to their colonial rulers. In conceptual terms, the British, who had started their rule as 'outsiders', were becoming 'insiders' by vesting in their monarch the sovereignty of India in 1858.[1] At the same time, elite groups of administrative and religious specialists were reorienting their own assumptions and practices in keeping with the systems of authority in a new, self-consciously modern epoch. Military and civil service functionaries, missionaries and planters were playing an active part in this process, alongside the indigenous groups whose redirection of services accompanied the assimilation of Assam into the Indian sub-continent. As Peter Burroughs points out, Britain's governance of Empire involved dynamic processes, not static structures and inert constitutional frameworks, as some earlier imperial historians imagined.[2]

By locating this process in the larger context of an evolving relationship between state, temple and gentry from the precolonial period, the chapter stresses that colonial developments should not be essentialised as 'modern' as opposed to 'traditional', or as the passive assimilation of Westernised indigenous groups into a Macaulayan agenda. It traces the displacement of an older world of precedence and ritual by new connective networks of indigenous elites positioning themselves within an associational culture and a vernacular public sphere. The chapter locates the creation

---

[1] Bernard S. Cohn, "Representing Authority in Victorian India" in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983, p.165.
[2] Peter Burroughs, "Imperial Institutions and the Governance of Empire" in Andrew Porter ed., *The Nineteenth Century: The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Oxford, 1999, p.170.

of such an Assamese public within the accelerated involvement of the inhabitants of the province with areas and people external to the homeland. Their interactions with colonial modernity in the form of its education system, the printing press, consumption patterns and the colonial city were the backdrop to the shaping of a social identity which sought to balance cultural particularity with national belonging. The devotional mode of Vaishnavism was a significant way to articulate this new identity. Vaishnavism's extension in scale from a localised shrine system to a wider, abstract form of deification around a historicised founder, Sankardeb, served to insert Assam within a wider landscape of Indic Bhakti. Literature, language and religion would form the elements from which a middle class would aspire to claim a place as progressive, Assamese and Indian.

3 (1) From Dangariya to Babu

Assam's previous rulers, whom the British had first 'liberated' and then dethroned, were the Ahom, a dynasty claiming links with Shan chiefs in Upper Burma. By the fifteenth century, they had acquired a predominant position among an assortment of local chiefdoms such as the Chutia, the Kachari and the Koch, gradually extending their sway from Upper to Lower Assam. The first British travellers reported to the East India Company that the Ahom kings, the Swargadeos, had ruled the entire province for the last six hundred years.[3] The highest offices of state were, in theory at least, a monopoly of the Satgharia Ahom ('seven leading clans') by virtue of their military prowess and aristocratic lineage.[4] After their 'liberation' from the Burmese by the British, this warrior aristocracy crumbled remarkably quickly, weakened by decades of internal strife. So striking was its collapse that British officialdom was divided on the issue of whether the usual figurehead restoration of indigenous authority was necessary. A pliable scion, Purandar Singha, was raised in 1833 to some semblance of his ancestral honours, but his inevitable deposition, five years later, was attended by surprisingly little dissent. Though one celebrated adherent of the Ahom regime, Maniram Barbhandar Barua, ended on the gallows when a plot for dynastic

---

[3] "Report of Captain Welsh" in H.K. Barpujari ed., *An Account of Assam and Her Administration*, Guwahati, 1988, p.86.

[4] While the institution of kingship and the Patra-Mandali had retained their clan linkages, non-Ahoms had been admitted to other posts, though often only after undergoing fictitious adoption by an Ahom clan. Amalendu Guha, "The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into State Formation in Medieval Assam: 1228-1714," Social Scientist, December 1983.

restoration was discovered in 1857, it was little more than a palace conspiracy with little of the popular participation evinced in North India.

Within the partially monetised Ahom economy, its notables had held ample shares in the state's prerogatives of land and labour. These came in the form of khats ('hereditary landed estates'), with attached bandi-beti and bahatia servile labour, supplemented by the service from peasants to which holders of state offices were entitled.[5] Therefore, the worst impact of the British takeover for this aristocracy came in the form of the 1843 Parliamentary Act abolishing slavery in the East Indies. In a sparsely populated region where the Burmese depredations had only accentuated a general labour scarcity, once the higher classes were deprived of their unpaid work force, economic decline soon followed the political. A British pension to eke out the remnants of ancestral wealth was what the precolonial dangariya was reduced to, as the begging letters in the Company's records testify. In this vacuum, it was only the lesser service class, those who had 'occupied less honourable posts under the Ahom Government',[6] which successfully made its way through the clerical ranks of the colonial machinery. As one of its members scornfully observed, 'on account of a common belief that the Company's Raj could not last long, as well as the idea of a vain glory, the first generation of Assamese noblemen...did not think of educating their children.'[7] This supported the local British official's contention to his superiors at Calcutta, concerned at the rapid demise of the old aristocracy, that 'the members of the late ruling class, the Ahoms...have hitherto shown, with few exceptions, little aptitude for learning or qualification for our offices, which consequently have generally fallen to the lot of the Brahmins and the Kagotees'.[8]

That predominantly high caste service gentry had already had a long innings within the region's bureaucracy, beginning with the prominence its scribal skills had earned after the seventeenth-century consolidation of the Ahom state over the entire

---

[5] Only some 25% of the estimated 16,512 paiks in Lower Assam had served the state directly while the rest were employed upon the estates bestowed upon religious establishments or officeholders. See H.K. Barpujari, "Re-assessment and Agrarian Riots, " in *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. 5, Guwahati, 1992, p.29.

[6] Note on the Condition of the People of Assam (in reply to confidential circular issued by Government of India); Note by Rai Gunabhiram Sarma Borua Bahadur, Extra Assistant Commissioner, Nowgong. Assam Secretariat File 824 R, 1888, ASA.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Fort William Revenue Proceedings, July 1855, Nos. 27-8, NAI.

Brahmaputra valley. After the takeover by the new colonial regime, those skills ensured that 'Katki, Kakoti, Khaund, Bordaloi, Hazarika, Mazumdar, Boruah and Borah' could continue to occupy 'responsible posts after the British conquest'.[9] Despite competition from the Bengali amla following in the wake of the British, a considerable proportion of revenue and judicial posts remained with this precolonial service gentry. Partly, this stemmed from what Captain Jenkins acknowledged as a considerable dependence upon their specialised knowledge of local land tenures.

> The officers who had the preparing and keeping of the lakhiraj records were Mozemdar Burrooahs and Mozemdars, in whose families the appointments were hereditary. We had three or four of these officers at the commencement of the investigation, who were personally conversant with the grants made during the reigns of the last three Rajahs, and they knew from their fathers what grants had been made through the reigns of the three preceding Rajahs.[10]

This mastery over land records benefited not only the colonial regime which wished to set the administrative infrastructure in order. Since, for this clerical class, mouzadari rights over land comprised an important component of their material base, the numbers of their fellows in the revenue and judicial offices did much to consolidate those rights. Their role in reordering the lakhiraj records also did a great deal in smoothing the transition into the new order for another indigenous group, the Gosains of the satras.

3 (2) Gosain, *Shish* and Satra

Precolonial authority had taken two distinct forms, the warrior mode and the spiritual. We can trace the demise of one and the adaptation of the other, through the transformation of social relations engendered by British rule. Rather than the warrior aristocracy, it was the spiritual notables associated with the precolonial regime who managed to retain a considerable amount of wealth and prestige, though in very different circumstances. As with the service gentry, these notables should be viewed in the long-term light of their transactions with state authority. In this Assam valley, a distant frontier of the Indic cultural tradition, certain 'Hinduised' structures came to provide an important component in the transformation of pioneer peasant colonists into ruling lineages. The Ahom state's journey from one of several smaller

---

[9] Ibid.
[10] A.J. M. Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1854 (reprint Guwahati, 1982), Appendix H, p.86.

chieftainships to the region's dominant kingly tradition had been accompanied by the development of a symbiotic relationship with religious specialists which enabled a transcending of its lowly ritual status to that of 'protectors of cows and priests'.[11] The next part of this chapter explores how this world of precolonial authority was affected by the cultural and material absorption of Assam into a province of British India.

These spiritual lords had comprised the heads of prominent satras ('Vaishnavite monasteries') and shrines (such as the Parbatiya Gosain of the Kamakhya temple). An estimate of their following is available only for the later nineteenth century when W.W. Hunter reported that the Hindu population was divided into four main sects, Tantrik, Bhagavatiya, Mahapurusiya and Thakuria. The last three, making up the broad Vaishnavite movement associated with the Bhakti preacher Sankardeb, comprised 'almost all people of middle and better lower classes' and 'a few of the middle and most of the lower classes'.[12] From the sixteenth century onwards, this faith had spread widely with the populist message that anyone could attain salvation through its four elements of God, Guru, the fraternity of devotees and chanting the divine name. In its broadest form, Assamese Vaishnavism was a monotheistic, congregationalist form of religious practice, which rapidly displaced, though it never totally dislodged, a medley of Tantric and Sakta cults. Its notion of the relationship between devotee and guru was modelled on that between God and man, institutionalised in a ceremony of saran ('formal spiritual initiation'). By the seventeenth century, the faith centred upon the satras, hundreds of religious estates, where the gurus (called Gosain, Mahanta or Satradhikar) were based. Each satra possessed its own lands and tenants, linked with a larger network of villages and tithe-paying lay devotees. Many became very wealthy, particularly the ones that obtained royal favour from the Ahom state.[13]

---

[11] In this, it was able to marginalise a previous regime that had established itself as Brahminical patrons, the Koch kings in Lower Assam, whose unsuccessful encounters with the Bengal Nawabs and the Ahoms in the seventeenth century enabled the latter to take over their territorial and ritual holdings. Patronage of Vaishnavite devotionalism and of the Kamakhya shrine as well as a court tradition of 'vernacularisation' were cultural elements appropriated by the Ahom from the Koch, who sank to the position of their vassals.

[12] W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 1, London, 1879, p.29.

[13] Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, Calcutta, 1985, p.56.

The popularity of this sect's teachings stemmed from its seemingly egalitarian and simple content in comparison with the esoteric mysteries of Tantricism. Assamese Vaishnavism held that all men were equal in the eyes of God, that elaborate rituals were meaningless and that a spiritual preceptor could be chosen from any caste, even by a Brahmin.[14] However, a growing tendency towards institutional Brahminisation gradually modified those principles, strengthened by state patronage of its more conservative factions. Though the Ahom monarchy had initially regarded the new sect with disfavour, the farsighted Rudra Singha replaced persecution with a selective patronage aimed at strengthening the sect's socially conservative elements. For instance, a conference of Gosains held under his orders in 1702 passed strictures against practices such as the spiritual initiation of Brahmin disciples by Sudra gurus.[15] As with other peasant warrior regimes making the transition to kingship, a hierarchical religious vocabulary was becoming apposite to the regime's agenda.[16]

By the end of the seventeenth century, four competing samhatis ('orders') had emerged - the Brahma, Purusa, Nika and Kala, with marked social differentiation between them in doctrine and membership. The Brahma samhati, including the prominent Auniati and Dakhinapat satras, was known for its social conservatism and political association with the Ahom kings. Its main distinguishing features were its domination by Brahmin Gosains, conformity to Vedic rites and veneration of idols.[17] The most socially heterodox Vaishnavites were in the Kala Samhati, whose institutions were mostly headed by Sudra gurus.[18] Among them, the most powerful was the Moamoria satra, which had clout enough to challenge the Ahom

---

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Veena Naregal has pointed out, in the Maratha context, how by the late seventeenth century, vernacular devotional expression was patently less anti-hierarchical and more inclined to uphold the benefits of institutional structures in the religious and political spheres. See "Language and Power in Precolonial Western India: Textual Hierarchies, Literate Audiences and Colonial Philology" in Indian Economic and Social History Review, 37, (3), 2000, pp.259-94.
[17] The Auniati satra was supposed to have been founded at the order of the Ahom king Jayadhvaj Singha by a Brahmin, Niranjan. Other 'seceding' Brahmin disciples of Sankardev founded the Dakshinpat, Garumur and Kuruwabahi satras of the Brahma samhati. See Kesavananda Dev Goswami, *Post Sankardeva Vaisnava Faith and Culture of Assam*, Delhi, 1988, p.39.
[18] Ibid, p.118. A detailed history of the samhatis and the satras within them is available in the "Buranji Vivekratna" attributed to Maniram Barbhandar Barua, which was compiled in the first half of the nineteenth century. A transcript of its second volume is available at the DHAS.

establishment on behalf of its thousands of disciples from lower caste and tribal groups, during the late-eighteenth-century peasant uprisings.[19]

We have to place the mushrooming of all these satras in the context of expanding agricultural activity into previously uncultivated areas, encouraged by the Ahom state through land and labour grants.[20] The 'history' of one satra, brought to us through colonial enquiries into landed tenures, serves as an example. 'It is stated that originally there was one Gosain at "Borduar," somewhere in Lower Assam.'[21] This was a reference to the eponymous founder, Sankardeb, whose hagiographies declared the village of Borduar, near Nowgong, to be his birthplace. Significantly, this account, based on popular testimony, was not concerned with asserting the identity of this founder, ensconced as he was in the distant past, but preferred to focus upon his contemporary representatives.

> Subsequently at different times, twelve Gosains issued from Borduar, and founded Sastras in different places...these Gosains went forth as religious teachers and gathered around them the people residing in the locality where they founded their Satras, so that the Gosains are not in Upper Assam, as a rule, of the same origin as their followers: they are Aryans; their followers may have been Aryans or non-Aryans.[22]

Such a distinction, even if retrospective, between the Gosains' 'Aryan' origin and their congregation of low status *bhakats* ('religious initiates') has to be recognised as a strategy of social distancing practised by local elites, rather than as an infiltration of colonial race ideology. This account casts some light on the way in which Vaishnavite devotionalism served as a medium for the cultural acculturation of a peripheral population.

> As soon as the Gosains had established themselves, they applied to the Raja for some concession in virtue of their position as recognised religious

---

[19] See Amalendu Guha, "The Moamoria Revolution: Was it a Class War?" in The Assam Tribune, 18 October 1950. A divergent approach from Maheswar Neog, *Socio-Political Events in Assam leading to the Militancy of the Mayamariya Vaishnavas*, Calcutta, 1982.

[20] A parallel situation existed in the border districts of Bengal, such as Midnapore, where the large number of Vaishnavottar holdings that W.W. Hunter found existing as a result of land grants, had been responsible for land reclamation on a large scale in an area dotted with jungle and marshes. Ramakant Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1985, p.253. Also see Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760*, Berkeley, 1993.

[21] Revenue and Agriculture Proceedings, Nos. 11-14, February 1885, Letter No. 638 from Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, 27 October 1884, NAI.

[22] Ibid.

> [teachers] of the people, and they were generally successful. In this part of the province, no revenue was paid to the state, but service was exacted instead, so that the concession made by the Raja took the form of exemption from personal service such as working on roads, building houses etc. [23]

It is worth noting here that the origin myths of the prominent Brahma satras located on the Majuli island, such as the Auniati, took a different form, claiming direct affiliation with the Ahom state through their Gosain's status as royal preceptor.[24] But given the outlying tracts the satra estates covered, and the tribal and lower caste composition of the tenants therein, there can be little doubt that the same process of expanding settled plough agriculture was at work.

Thereby, in late medieval Assam, the spread of Sanskritic religious authority served as an important arm of the state's programme to expand the agricultural frontier.[25] But, at the same time, a contradiction emerged between state agenda and satra success, centreing around the most pressing issue for any regime in the sparsely populated Assam valley, that of control over the labour force. While the state had imposed the corvée for its peasants, the satra held virtually autonomous status as a realm whose inmates were exempt from this obligation. Over the eighteenth century, the paik showed a growing inclination to seek refuge from state obligations by taking on the identity of a bhakat. This is where an uneasy relationship can be discerned between these two nodes of local authority. A symbolic dimension was lent to this by the later Ahom kings refusing to take initiation from the Gosains, their subjects, and instead importing Brahmins from Nadia to officiate as royal preceptor and over the Sakta shrine of Kamakhya, with the title of Parbatiya Gosain.[26] The mutual accommodation between the satra and temporal lords coexisted with an underlying rivalry over their authority over the population, which possessed the potential to spill

---

[23] Ibid.

[24] See Tirthanath Sarma, *Auniati Satrar Buranji*, Majuli, 1975.

[25] Satyendra Nath Sarma gives a comprehensive list of 380 satras which shows that all except four, were founded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See his *Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*, Guwahati, 1966.

[26] While Rudra Singha had accepted the Auniati Gosain as his guru, all his successors, until the last Ahom incumbent on an independent throne, Gaurinath Singha, were initiated by the Parbatiya Gosains, who traced their lineage to Nadia. This also testifies to the growing influence, through the eighteenth century, of Bengal Saktaism, and the absorption of the local Kamakhya cult into its orbit, as well as the vogue for celebrating Durga Puja. An indicator of this was Haliram Dhekial Phukan's Kamakhya-yatra-paddhati, a Sanskrit guide for pilgrims published from Calcutta in 1829. At the same time, the Auniati Gosain remained the single most important 'spiritual lord' of Assam.

over into violent conflict. While the Ahom regime's consolidation had proceeded through its patronage of the Brahmin-dominated satras, this brought in its wake a growing escalation of differences within Vaishnavism, between the former and the other, more socially heterodox samhatis. Ultimately, the latter provided an alternate locus of authority for low caste and tribal groups on the Ahom periphery, and their rallying point for challenge when the Ahom state attempted to tighten its hold. The victory over the Moamoria was a pyrrhic one, for the external assistance that it entailed accepting, from the Burmese and then from the British, sealed the Ahom fate.

In the wake of the British takeover, the position of the Brahminical satras actually improved, compared to the dislocation the Moamoria uprisings and Burmese interregnum had caused. By the 1830s and 1840s, they managed to recover most of their landed privileges and lakhiraj rights, assisted by strategically placed *shish* ('disciples') among the nascent babu class. The former missionary William Robinson noted that in Kamrup district alone, the total lakhiraj lands amounted to 'nearly one-half of the cultivated area...besides including an immense extent of garden and other lands of great value'.[27] This allowed the Brahminical satras to face the future in much better circumstances than their former patrons of the Ahom royalty. However, this should not be taken to indicate that colonial officials regarded them with any degree of approbation. Stereotypes of cunning Brahmins, their links with the old regime and their influence over the common people all contributed towards a fear of the Gosains as potential troublemakers. Captain John Butler made his opinion on this matter clear to Justice Mills' enquiry.

> The very great consideration shown to these priests, by allowing them such an extent of country on half Khiraj rates, would from any other class of men have called forth the utmost gratitude, but the reverse is the case with these grasping priests. Possessed of great power over the minds of the people, bigoted, ignorant and avaricious, they do not, in the smallest degree, through the means at their disposal, aid in the education of the people...they may truly be said to be the only disaffected subjects of the government in the plains of Assam.[28]

---

[27] William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, Calcutta, 1841, p.285.
[28] Mills, *Report*, Captain John Butler's evidence, p.25.

Butler's colleagues too, were not slow in recording their impatience at these 'grasping priests', who despite 'the very great consideration shown...may be considered the greatest impediment we have to contend with in enlightening the rising generation'.[29]

We have to situate such British hypersensitivity in the context of the changing political economy that colonialism was bringing in its wake. Only a few years after the treaty of Yandaboo, the old elites had again to deal with the British resumption of the Upper Assam territories in 1836 and the abolition of slavery in 1843. The ineffectual nature of the conspiracies by dispossessed aristocrats should not blind us to the severe dislocation they signified.[30] In this atmosphere, the Political Department was understandably worried by reports that 'all the principal priests and Mahantas are dissatisfied towards our Government and would be glad of any change...They possess far too much influence even at present, which they exert for evil purposes'.[31] But what is remarkable is that no action was taken against any of the Gosains, not even in the hysterical mood of 1857 when an example was made of the courtier Maniram Barbhandar Barua, the episode associated with Captain Holroyd's apocryphal remark that 'we will hang you first and try you later'.[32] Despite the fact that correspondence was found addressed from the rebels to leading Gosains, none of the latter was called to task. Doubtless, the fact that the Vaishnavite sects bore the allegiance of 'almost all people of middle and better lower classes' and 'most of the lower classes'[33] was reason enough to allow the satras to rest undisturbed, for now, in their 'arrogance and disaffection'.[34]

3 (3) Queen, Gosain and Babu

It was in the reworking of British claims to legitimacy in the post-1857 epoch that these two actors, the Gosain as representatives of an older mode of legitimacy, and the self-consciously modernising imperial regime - would bring their relationship to resolution. The Queen's proclamation of 1858 was a cultural statement encompassing

---

[29] Ibid.
[30] A good example was the uprising by Gomdhar Konwar. See A.C. Banerjee, "The New Regime: 1826-31," in H.K. Barpujari, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. 4, p.22.
[31] Miscellaneous letters, Judicial, 25 February, 1843; Letter from Captain Gordon, Junior Assistant to the Agent to Governor General, to Captain Brodie, Political Assistant, Sibsagar; ASA.
[32] Benudhar Sarma, *Maniram Dewan*, Guwahati, 1950, p.189.
[33] W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 1, p.29.
[34] Mills, *Report*, Butler's evidence, p.25.

two divergent or even contradictory theories of rule, one seeking to maintain India as a feudal order, and the other looking towards changes which would inevitably lead to the destruction of such an order. Each theory incorporated ideas about the sociology of India, and the relationship of the rulers to individuals and groups in Indian society. If India was to be ruled in a feudal mode, then an Indian aristocracy had to be present to play the part of loyal feudatories to their British Queen. On the other hand, if India was to be ruled by the British in a modernist mode, then principles for a new kind of civic or public order had to be developed. In both modes, although Indians might become associated with their white rulers as feudatories or as representatives of communities and interests, effective decisions would be made by the British rulers.[35] An encounter between the Auniati Gosain, the representative of precolonial dignity, and the Lieutenant Governor, spokesman for the Queen brought the contradictory impulses of these theories to the fore.

From 1858, as part of the re-establishment of political order, Lord Canning, the first viceroy of India, undertook a series of tours through North India to make manifest the new relationship with Indians proclaimed by Queen Victoria. An important feature of his tours was the meetings with Indian notables, British and Indian officials, glorified by the name of the Indo-Persian royal assembly, the *durbar*. In outlying parts of the sub-continent, similar ambulations were undertaken by less illustrious plenipotentiaries. Assam's turn was in July 1862, when Cecil Beadon, the new Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, arrived at Gauhati. Such a visit by a high official to this remote 'cul de sac' of the Bengal Presidency had been due a decade ago, but the 1857 uprising had caused it to be postponed. Now such an individual had arrived, but as a representative of the queen, rather than of the Company. Just as Lord Canning had done, Beadon hosted ceremonial durbars for the native elite of Assam at Gauhati and Sibsagar.

It was a local babu who recorded for posterity his own perspective on these durbars, and the momentous encounter they instigated between state and temple. The author of this memoir was a native official, Harakanta Barua (1805-1900). Harakanta was born into the local service gentry, to a family of the Daivagna astrologer caste which held

---

[35] Cohn, "Representing Authority," p.166.

charge of official land records. In his memoir, we learn how his father, the holder of the post of Majumdar Baruah to the last Ahom kings, fled with his family and the rest of the court to North Bengal at the time of the Burmese invasions. After order was restored by the British, Harakanta entered their service. At the time of Beadon's visit, he was employed at the Collector's office in Gauhati, retiring from service a few years later with the rank of Sadar Amin. Like his better known contemporaries, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Maniram Barbhandar Barua, his life involved a complex set of manoeuvres between the old and the new regimes. But in his case, we get a rare direct insight into this process through his memoir, the first personal testimony by an inhabitant of Assam.[36]

The language of this text is very accessible, reading virtually in conversational mode, in an easy first-person narrative. The author's revenue training is apparent in the many Persian and Hindustani terms with which his colloquial Assamese is interspersed. The memoir appears to have been written in the last years of Harakanta's life, probably collated from notes. His intended readership was almost certainly confined to his own family, judging from his inclusion of intimate household details.[37] The text conveys a strong sense of the author's preoccupation with issues of hierarchy and deference, as he regales us with details of his interactions with the various superiors in his life, Ghanakanta Singha and Padmabati Kunwari of the former royal family, the Commissioner and his wife (the Memsahib), as well as his guru, the Gosain. The author's interiorised self is made available to us only indirectly, through the nuances of such transactions. One of the most striking of these indirect depictions of self is at the moment of Beadon's durbar, an occasion when different nodes of authority were actively competing for his allegiance. This allows us a rare insight into the service gentry - the disciples of the Gosains and the clerks of the British order - being brought face to face with such a moral dilemma. For us, a 'thick description' of this encounter can serve as a unique entry point into the cultural and political transition from the old to the new 'lords of the land'.

---

[36] Harakanta Barua, *Sadar Aminor Atmajivani* ('The Autobiography of a Sadar Amin'), Guwahati, 1930. This was his manuscript's first appearance in print, under the aegis of his grandson, who gave it this title.

[37] For instance, Harakanta gives details of the division of family property between him and his brother. *Atmajivani*, p.147.

At this point in the second half of the nineteenth century, the spiritual lords of Assam were confronted with a designated role in a new order where the British regime was arrogating unto itself an entirety of authority. Like the native princes in other parts of India, the Gosains would be allowed a share as long as they accepted their assigned place within that scheme. It is in this post-1857 period that we see tangible changes entering the equation between the British and local notables, once the Company Raj had been replaced by that of the Queen. The external forms of deference to native elites were to be maintained, but in a form domesticated within the increasing pomp and display of imperial authority. We can now trace a process by which the spiritual lords of Assam, like the native princes in other parts of India, were to act as accoutrements of state power, and be well repaid for doing so. However, that situation would take time to evolve, and involve many a slip along the way.

Harakanta's account of the 1862 encounter opened in a rather cryptic manner, with his mention of the Lieutenant Governor's visit as being imminent juxtaposed with a declaration of his nervousness regarding the event. We gather that his anxiety was focused upon one particular occasion, the reception Cecil Beadon was hosting for local elites on board his ship, the Rohtas. This was the only occasion when the babus, the local notables and the British officials would all congregate in the same space. The text recounted Harakanta's reluctance to attend the reception, how he did so only when his superior, Captain Lloyd, would not countenance his absence and sent an orderly to fetch him. 'I had no wish to be present there, when the Gosains would all be sitting.'[38] Sitting alongside the spiritual lords was the crux of the matter. In the 1830s, the first British administrator of Assam, David Scott had recorded that 'the Gosains or archbishops residing at or near Gowahatty get chairs when they call upon European officers, but those in Upper Assam prefer to bring with them their own particular seats as prescribed by ancient custom. No other individuals are permitted to sit in the presence of the archbishops'.[39] However, as we shall see, the day had since gone by for Scott's punctilious respect of local precedents to be followed.

---

[38] Ibid, p.143.
[39] Adam White, ed., "David Scott's Historical Notes", in *A Memoir of the Late David Scott*, Calcutta, 1832, p.164.

As he tells us, Harakanta and his fellow clerks were shown to chairs at that part of the assembly where the Gosains and the erstwhile royal family were seated, with the British officials at the other end of the ship. The occasion itself went off without any overt ripple, but as Harakanta anticipated, a reckoning would come. The next day, he received what he had expected, a furious note from his spiritual lord, cursing him for his impudence at sitting on a chair in his presence. With this rebuke fresh on his mind, Harakanta warned Captain Lloyd that a serious breach of custom had occurred. The Collector flew into a passion.

> I've never encountered such a land before. Respectable people like a Deputy Collector to sit upon the floor. Your Rajas and others may have been rulers once, who had created aristocrats and Gosains around them. That Raja is no more now, even if the rank is still respected. The Maharani Victoria is at the head of India. She has created Deputy Collectors and others. Don't they have rank and honour too? [40]

Such an affront to their prestige was something that the Gosains could not pass unchallenged. At Beadon's next reception at Sibsagar, the headquarters of the prominent Brahminical satras, the proceedings were interrupted when the doyen of Assam's spiritual lords, the Auniati Gosain, objected to 'natives' sitting in his presence. The Assamese Deputy Magistrate, himself the former's disciple, hastily sat down on the floor. However, the Commissioner, Major Haughton, angrily ordered him back on his chair and the durbar continued without further incident. Subsequently, Dutta Deb Goswami, the Auniati Gosain wrote to Haughton, avowedly as an apology for his refusal 'to be seated equally with the natives'. He claimed that the entire misunderstanding had come about only as no one had informed the British authorities of 'the customs and manners prevalent in Assam'. 'I had been told and assured that no native would take chair in the Muzhib except me, but upon entering the hall, I perceived the contrary. I declined to sit, for natives were not authorized by ancient Rajas to accept any respectable seat in my presence.'[41]

This document was duly forwarded to the Bengal Government, and vouchsafed a stern response.

---

[40] *Atmajivani*, p.145.
[41] Letters received by Government of Assam; No. 13 of 1862, ASA.

> To be received at the Durbar of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal who is the representative of the Queen is a high honour to all her subjects whatever their position may be. The representative of the Queen does not change the arrangements of his Court, to suit the fancies or habits of individuals...The Rajas of Assam had ceased to have any power long before British rule commenced and all honours that are now enjoyed in the British Durbar can only be enjoyed in so far as they are conceded by the British Government which seeks to elevate all of its subjects and desires the abject degradation of none.[42]

This was a significant variety of rhetoric being deployed here, of the British throne as the sole emanation of power and of an egalitarian status to be extended to all its subjects. In a sense, it was very much the tone and spirit of the Queen's proclamation of 1858 that was being evoked.

However, this incident also illuminates some other aspects to this situation. In the context of Assam, the British had taken to portraying themselves as the emancipators of a people from a retrograde system of slavery. This was the same logic allowing a petition for maintenance from the erstwhile aristocracy to be dismissed upon the grounds that 'the nobility of Assam as of other parts of India was maintained chiefly by class privileges and by slavery, which are opposed to the whole spirit of British rule and the resuscitation would be an unmixed evil'.[43]

Such statements should not necessarily be taken at face value. A delicate balancing act was at play whereby, on the one hand, modern notions of merit as opposed to inherited privilege, of education as against ancestral status, were being held up as the reigning precepts of a new modernising order, both by British administrators and the emergent intelligentsia. On the other hand, in the aftermath of the Mutiny, this was the very context for select groups of traditional elites to be seized upon as suitable supporters of the social and political status quo. This incident allows us a glimpse of one such moment, in which a traditional elite was being socialised into a new role within the Raj - of rank without presumption, as it were. The Gosains had to learn that

---

[42] Ibid.

[43] Home Public Proceedings 'A', March 1875, Nos. 182-3; Observations on the Memorial presented by Inhabitants of Gauhati and Sibsagar to the Viceroy on his Visit to Assam; From the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner to the Secretary to the Government of India, NAI.

the uneasy oscillation between accommodation and challenge that had characterised their relationship with the precolonial state was no longer permissible. The British regime was arrogating unto itself an entirety of authority, and the Gosains would be allowed to share in that authority only as long as they accepted their basic place within that scheme. It was not just a separation of domains that was being arrived at here, but rather an admission by traditional elites that the new regime possessed the ultimate sanction over all spheres of authority, and their share therein was something for which they had to be suitably grateful.

Harakanta provides us with another glimpse into his interaction with these different nodes of authority when he describes the prominent role he had played in arranging a meeting for Padmabati, the Ahom princess, with the Commissioner's wife. We see him informing his readers that the white woman's affection for him was such that 'she would only address me as "son"'.[44] Joanna de Groot's study of the interactions of the categories 'sex' and 'race' stresses the power of the images of the parent-child relationship, on the one hand, and the master-servant relationship, on the other. These relationships provide metaphors blending the unquestioned subordination, physical closeness and servicing of personal needs involved in the roles played by women before men and by 'natives' before colonial superiors.[45] It is an interesting variation of these themes that we see in Harakanta, with his conscious enactment of the 'native as child' role vis-a-vis a white woman, who herself, at one point, tells him that she is helpless in front of her husband. Significantly, we do not see him enunciating any such role with the dispossessed Ahom royals – with them, his function was that of the loyal and trusted adviser who was clearly more adept in negotiating the mazes of the new order. Harakanta takes pains to spell out that it was only his influence over the Ahom Yuvaraj ('prince') Ghanakanta Singha which stopped him from joining Maniram's ill-fated scheme for restoring the precolonial order in 1857. It was Harakanta who convinced the Ahom prince that the British were here to stay, and that those attempts to move against them could only end in disaster.

---

[44] *Atmajivani*, p.98.
[45] Joanna de Groot, "'Sex' and 'Race': the Construction of Language and Empire in the Nineteenth century," in Catherine Hall, *Cultures of Empire*, Manchester, 2000, p.43.

As far as the Lieutenant Governor's reception and its aftermath was concerned, we see Harakanta torn between his reverence for his guru, and his consciousness of the new status that has been bestowed upon him as a representative of the Queen. This text stands alone in offering us a rare glimpse of an individual's perception of this cusp between historical orders. Harakanta's text portrays him veering uneasily between the old and the new, conscious of being upon the edge of a precipice. What his account finally showed was how older hierarchies were being supplanted by newer forms of precedence. The Ahom aristocrats had already sunk to living on meagre pensions and the Gosains, while still wealthy, could clearly no longer place themselves alongside, let alone higher than the rulers. British rule was asserting its pyramid of authority and Harakanta and his cohorts were finding that their place therein required new modes of legitimation.

Through the text, we find an accompanying trope of status affirmation, with Harakanta stressing his care for ritual purity - there are copious details of how he cooked his own meals in his wife's absence, would not eat anything at the Ahom prince's home, and discarded all the food that his patroness, the Commissioner's wife, pressed upon him.[46] There is thus, another sublimated narrative here, where his public superiors, whether Ahom or British, were inferior to him in terms of ritual status. His anxiety over flouting the Gosain's authority partly stemmed from this same set of concerns. He had good reason for fearing the Gosain's displeasure, considering the array of penalties the satras were in the habit of meting out to their erring followers. But also, this signified a desire to filiate to Indic modes of caste tradition and identity, emphasised by his mention of his pilgrimage to the sacred sites of North India.[47] This theme would be carried further by Assamese intelligentsia of the next generation, men such as Lakshminath Bezbarua, who would seek to locate the Assamiya Hindu within a larger Indic landscape. The Sadar Amin's longevity, which had colonial officials coming to check whether he was still alive or whether his pension was being fraudulently claimed, meant that he was witness to the rise of a new generation, the

---

[46] *Atmajivani*, p.98.
[47] Ibid, p.192.

intelligentsia, a social transformation that would supersede the dangariya universe to which he belonged.[48]

3 (4) Missionary, Gosain, Commissioner

Over the next few years, occasional tension between state and temple still appeared, the most prominent instance being when the Auniati and Dakhinpat Gosains were summoned before a British court at Sibsagar for allowing the cultivation of prohibited opium upon their lands.[49] This was followed by rumours that they had retaliated to this humiliation by placing a curse upon the unfortunate officer concerned with the case. The reports about this curse were grave enough to merit a reaction, both from the local officials as well as from the local missionary outpost.[50] The Assistant Commissioner reported to his superiors that soon after the Gosains had been summoned and penalised for their offence, 'the Deputy Commissioner, Captain Sconce became seriously ill and a rumour was at once eagerly circulated throughout the whole of Majuli and beyond that of his death which had been caused by the Auniati Gosain's having cursed him, in revenge for his having dared to summon and punish him as a common criminal'.[51]

Another, more public response to the rumours of the curse appeared in the pages of the region's first vernacular periodical, the Orunodoi, published from the American Baptist Mission at Sibsagar. From 1846, it was through this organ that these missionaries sought to socialise the local population into their new print culture of Christian devotion and modern information. Usually, the missionaries were fairly circumspect in their polemics against local religious authority, feeling that 'the most effective way of defeating the purpose of the Brahmins is not to attack them personally, but to enlighten the masses'.[52] But ever since basing itself in the Assam

---

[48] 'His longevity...[is] a common topic of conversation even to this day. He enjoyed his pension of Rs 200 per month for nearly a quarter of a century and it is said that official inquiries were occasionally made to ascertain whether he was actually living.' Reported by S.K. Bhuyan, the Honorary Assistant Director of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS) in the "Introduction" to his edited volume of Harakanta Barua's *Assam Buranji or A History of Assam from the Commencement of Assam in 1826 AD, being an Enlarged Version of the Chronicle of Kasinath Tamuli Phukan*, Guwahati, 1930.

[49] "Illegal Opium Cultivation," Orunodoi, February 1867.

[50] Orunodoi, February, March and April 1867; and Letter 105, 19 April 1867; From A.N. Phillips, Assistant Commissioner in charge of Sibsagar to Commissioner, Assam, DRO.

[51] Letter 105, 1867, ASA.

[52] "Annual Meeting of Assam Mission, 1850," Baptist Missionary Magazine, May 1852.

Valley, Christian mission had recognised its main rival for people's minds and hearts as being the Gosains. Even the short-lived Serampore venture into the region had noted the 'spread of Brahminism by proselytising mahants in Assam...they give a discourse on initiation, forms of Hindu worship and the shastras to local people, then they ask for a house to be built for them. People then become bhakats or believers'.[53] The power that these religious specialists exerted over the people was evident in Nathan Brown's wry comment after his visit to the Moamoria Gosain that 'the young man who was in attendance was somewhat displeased that I did not address his master by the title of "God" as is their custom'.[54] Far from acknowledging the God of the missionary, the local people seemed to want the latter to pay obeisance to theirs.

It was hoped, however, that the printing press would function as the missionary's secret weapon. 'A monthly Paper, devoted to Religion, Science, and General Knowledge': that was what the Orunodoi declared itself to be, the agency through which the Baptists would deliver 'enlightenment' to the population of Assam, as monthly instalments of print in their own language.[55] Certainly, it was accepted as such by a growing readership among 'Young Assam' with one Brahmin correspondent extolling it as a 'gyan bhandar' ('a store of wisdom') in an essay entitled "What are the advantages for Assamese people in reading the Orunodoi?"[56] The missionaries were quite aware of the need to avoid being too heavy handed with their religious agenda. As with the general run of missionary periodicals, the Orunodoi saw fit to best achieve 'improvement' by linking Christian accounts with apparently secular and quite objective facts, from accounts of the working of nature to the differential progress of human societies.[57]

> Such headings appear as Turko-Russian hostilities; War in China; Revolution in Spain; Telegraph from Calcutta to Bombay...Illustrated articles on Astronomy, Geography and natural history conveyed useful and needed instruction, while temperance, veracity, self-reliance, family

---

[53] Friend of India, 4 August, 1836.
[54] Journal of Nathan Brown, 3 April, 1843, in Barpujari, *The American Missionaries*, p.56.
[55] The Orunodoi was published from the American Baptist Mission Press at Sibsagar from 1846 regularly until the 1860s, and then intermittently, until 1880. For a few years, it appeared in dual form, both as a broadsheet and a magazine.
[56] Shri Modram Sarma Bar Pujari, "What are the advantages for Assamese people in reading the Orunodoi?" Orunodoi, October 1856.
[57] See Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*, Cambridge, 1985, pp.50-87 for an analysis of missionary periodicals in Western India.

> government and other appropriate themes received attention. Through its columns, Christian hymns, translations of psalms, the Pilgrim's Progress, a brief history of the Apostles...found their way into heathen homes, where Christian scriptures in their usual form, could not have been admitted.[58]

Apart from such morsels of useful knowledge artfully scattered amidst the homilies, they followed the lead of missionaries in other regions, for instance, by offering a series of writings on astronomy, designed as a combination of secular information and religious propaganda. Such a strategy involved the dissemination of such scientific factuality partly as a laudable end in itself, and partly as an effective means to ridicule Puranic cosmology and its Brahmin guardians.[59] As the mission's annual report smugly declared, 'the Assamese, Brahmins as well as others, think it impossible to measure the distance of an inaccessible object...From the errors of the shasters on these...points, the people will readily see that they are only the work of man'.[60]

However, such measures did not achieve what was hoped for in terms of conversions, even if they managed to further the cause of rationality. As far as the mission's most important objective of proselytisation was concerned, they made a good beginning, acquiring a number of converts, such as Nidhi Levi Farwell, from the Assamese-speaking population, in their first decade of work in Upper Assam. But a handful of lower caste villagers was a very different constituency from the one the missionaries were looking for. They made no secret of their hopes of eventually winning over the most influential section of the Assamese, the high caste gentry, who had a near monopoly of educational opportunities and was coming to provide the bulk of the Orunodoi's reading public. This hope, encouraged perhaps by the highly publicised conversions of some young babus in Bengal, had influenced the mission in its move from remote Sadiya to Gauhati, Sibsagar and Nowgong. The high schools and courts associated with colonialism were concentrated in this area, providing a corps of educated youth whom the missionaries hoped to wean away from traditional beliefs. After the sparsely populated and densely forested tracts where the mission had spent its first years, such a relatively civilised part of the region would surely offer better

---

[58] "Annual Report, Assam, 1838," Baptist Missionary Magazine, December 1839, p.145.
[59] Richard Fox Young, *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India*, Vienna, 1981, p.82.
[60] "Report of the American Baptist Mission to Assam, 1845," Baptist Missionary Magazine, August 1846.

scope for 'improvement'. 'The principal government of the district is invested in this court, which brings together the most active, learned and intelligent part of the people...the population is a reading one.'[61]

Within a few years of its first appearance, the Orunodoi's focus on enlightenment through religious exhortations and secular truths was supplemented by contributions from this indigenous reading public, reflecting their concerns about education, language and the social regeneration of Assam. Instead of the piecemeal attacks on local superstitions by missionaries, there were now passionately argued polemics on social reform, mostly from the pens of natives, such as Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. In 1858, the Foreign Secretary of the board was informed, 'Our paper is now in its thirteenth year and is regarded by Young Assam at least, as one of the institutions of the province'.[62] It was this Young Assam, the literate and influential elite whom the missionaries were anxious to convert. This was, of course, similar to the attitudes taken by almost all missionaries of the period, evincing profound distrust of the motivations behind the conversion of lower classes. Various studies have drawn attention to the missionary obsession, in their first few decades of work, with converting Brahmins and the deferential attitude towards them.[63] The optimism engendered by even the slightest overture from a 'higher class' of native after the long years of effort expended upon the Orunodoi makes these hopes fairly clear. Mrs. Bronson anticipated winning over

> Two pundits...representative men of the educated Assamese. One is an old Brahmin, deeply read in Sanskrit...He seems to be like one of old, anxious to bow in the house of his god for appearance' sake, while in his heart he worships the only living and true God. The other is a representative of young Assam. He is bound hand and foot by the chains of custom and caste, like the old man, but he seems to have a conviction that there is truth in the new religion, and that he must seek for it.[64]

This hopefulness seems somewhat misplaced – it certainly points to a considerable gap between the type of flock the Baptist missionaries got and what they aspired to, at

---

[61] Journal of Barker, 1840-42, in Barpujari, *The American Missionaries*, pp.33-6.
[62] "Letter from Whiting to Peck", 1858, in Barpujari, *The American Missionaries*, p.158.
[63] See Anthony Copley, *Religions in Conflict*, Delhi, 1997; also Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*, London, 1980.
[64] Mrs Bronson, in Barpujari, *The American Missionaries*, p.83.

least until they entirely altered their priorities. Despite their desire for the educated Assamese, the few converts they acquired were almost all from a lower caste, unlettered background. These were largely dependent upon the mission for sustenance, as it was impossible to continue with their previous occupations in the face of social ostracism. For instance, Kolibor, one of the early converts, was a washerman who had to be taken on as a preacher by the Sibsagar church when he could no longer make a living. Others such as Kandura, the son of a blind beggar, proceeded into the faith through an education at the Orphan Institution. The usual channels for mobility within the colonial regime seem to have been fairly restricted even for educated native Christians from humble backgrounds compared to their counterparts from upper caste gentry families, a far greater proportion of whom were appointed to government jobs. For the Assamese Christians of this period, the ultimate government job within reach seems to have been that of a clerk or school inspector. Hardly any of them were appointed to the coveted revenue collectorate jobs that almost every native youth of 'good' family was able to obtain, through their greater access to both patronage and college education. Dick Kooiman has pointed out the perilous job prospects for educated native Christians of humble background in the princely state of Travancore,[65] but as we see, matters were not much better for such converts even under a British administration, given its unwillingness to upset indigenous social hierarchy.

For almost three decades after their entry into Assam, these missionaries retained hopes for a future respectable variety of converts, from among the class providing its reading public. It was only from this class that they felt sure of an intellectual acceptance of their creed, as opposed to what they regarded as the materialistic motives of the lower echelons. At the same time, a 'filtration' theory was in vogue, that higher-class converts would invite emulation by their subordinates. But the reality was that not one of these Assamese converts to Christianity was from the higher reaches of local society. Peasant society in Assam, lacking strong landlord-tenant ties, had developed a powerful substitute in the patronage links maintained by the satras dotting the countryside with their tithe-paying disciples from every rank of society. Such links with spiritual preceptors were as difficult to break for the peasants as for

---

[65] Dick Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality*, Amsterdam, 1989.

the gentry and even more than the ubiquity of caste, may account for the very scanty harvest the mission achieved among the Assamese population and the frequent complaints of 'backsliding' among those who did come into its reach.[66] Indeed, this failure to convert probably contributed to a relative complacency about the mission's activities, as compared to North India, for instance. Despite missionary complaints of priestly hostility, there does not seem to have been much active animus displayed by the satras. Indeed, among the names of Orunodoi writers and subscribers were some of their members.[67] One way of approaching this issue could be Richard Fox Young's contention that many Hindus were wont to adopt such a silence upon theological matters as part of their refusal to recognise other faiths as fully accredited 'dharmas' in opposition to their own.[68] But that would seem to attribute a degree of coherence, both institutional and doctrinal, which this periphery of the 'Great Tradition' was only slowly groping its way towards.

Once the first few years of the Orunodoi had shown that despite fulminating against indigenous 'superstitions' and advocating a Christian faith, it was not making inroads into the social constituency of the Gosains, it received praise for its patronage of the vernacular. Almost a century after its inception, a contributor to a contemporary Assamese journal remarked that local villagers were still in the habit of referring to any periodical paper that they came across by what they regarded as its generic name – an Orunodoi.[69] Rather than a head on collision, what we see is the gradual dissipation of the Orunodoi's unique position as local forces began to employ similar techniques. It is pertinent to recall here Jean Comaroff's argument that 'while missions helped sow the state of colonialism on which the colonial state was founded,' they simultaneously communicated 'a language for contesting the new mode of domination it had itself helped to create'.[70] By the 1870s, the Auniati Satra

---

[66] In a sermon delivered by Miles Bronson in 1850, he cited the three biggest obstacles facing them as 'caste, a venerated priesthood and sacred shasters...The priests declare they are superior to the sacred book! Why? Ours is not written by man, ours is as old as the world.' Miles Bronson Papers (Microfilm), North Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

[67] Kinaram Dutta from the Kamalabari satra; List of Subscribers, in Orunodoi, November 1853; and Krishnakanta Adhikar Gohain, from Kamalabari Satra in Orunodoi, October 1849.

[68] Fox Young, *Resistant*, p.141.

[69] Jnanabhiram Barua, "Agor Din" ('Those Bygone Days'), Abahon 1929. (Incidentally, the writer's father, Gunabhiram Barua, and his uncle, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, had been two of the most prominent indigenous supporters of the Orunodoi.).

[70] Jean Comaroff, "Missionaries and Mechanical Clocks: An Essay on Religion and History in South Africa", Journal of Religion in Africa, LXXI, 1991, p.7; cited by Norman Etherington, "Missions and

had itself acquired a printing press, titled the Dharma Prakash Press, and was circulating its own vernacular paper, the Asom Bilasini, as well as an assortment of devotional texts.[71] Publicists such as Gunabhiram Barua who had started their careers writing in the Orunodoi subsequently launched their own ventures, with periodicals such as the Assam Bandhu. By the end of the nineteenth century, the creation of informal print networks of friends, relatives and sympathisers by an emergent Calcutta based intelligentsia to distribute these products, signified the complete displacement of missionary-controlled modernity by indigenous cultural entrepreneurship.

In 1867, after years of effort in the area had yielded only a few score of unlettered converts (there were fifty Assamese Christians by 1858, after 25 years put in by no less than 22 missionaries), the curse upon the Commissioner seems to have brought all the spleen against the Gosains into play. While there is no record of any official riposte to the public who believed these rumours, the editor of the Orunodoi reacted with unwonted intemperance, with his stinging condemnation of a people so credulous as to attribute powers of life and death to priests and of the allegedly godly personages who encouraged such beliefs.[72] However, better sense seems to have prevailed, and the Orunodoi's next issue cooled down matters somewhat, helped along by a disclaimer of the curse in a letter from the Gosain.[73] For the different authorities concerned, it was certainly more politic to play down the incident as an example of rural rumour-mongering. Once the Auniati Gosain repudiated the curse and British officials denied that the Commissioner had died, the ripples caused by this incident gradually died down.

This seems to have been the last major confrontation for the new regime with these 'spiritual lords' – the relationship was gradually settling into a mode acceptable to both parties. The contrast between John Butler's low opinion of Gosains in the 1840s and the eulogy delivered to them in the gazetteers of the early twentieth century could

---

Empire" in Robin W. Winks ed., *Historiography: The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Oxford, 1999, p.309.

[71] A study of extant books at various archives reveals that apart from those periodicals, a few textbooks such as *Itihas Mala*, 1876 also appeared from the Dharma Prakash press. The normal print run for the periodicals was about 400 copies but could vary between 100-500 for other printed matter.

[72] "General Intelligence," Orunodoi, March 1867.

[73] "Letter from Auniati Gosain," Orunodoi, April 1867.

not be sharper. 'The Gosains have always been distinguished by their loyalty to Government and render a real service to the administration by encouraging purity of life and obedience to the authorities.'[74] By the end of the century, the annual tours of the District Commissioners of Jorhat usually culminated in their stay as honoured guests of the wealthy lords on the Majuli island.[75] A distinction, however, needs to be made between these wealthy landholding satras and the petty Gosains in the locality, whose precarious economic position and social following among lower castes set them apart from the grandees of Majuli. It was these small lords in the localities who apparently 'instigated' peasant protests at the mels against the inflated revenue assessment of 1894.[76] In subsequent decades, Gandhian nationalism would be the chief mode of resistance to colonial authority, but it was just one maverick among the Gosains, Pitambardev Goswami of the Garamur satra, who would adopt its agenda of social inclusion accompanying political resistance.[77] For the most part, British incorporation of these 'old' lords was successful in this respect – most of the Gosains would be unwilling to partake of any defiance of the established state authority.

3 (5) Education, City, Community

Education, *chakri*, print culture - these have been posited by Sumit Sarkar as the basic determinants of colonial middle-class life.[78] The rest of this chapter explores how these experiences and institutions operated upon the emergent social identity of an Assamese intelligentsia, and their changing perceptions of homeland and people. While some of the general contours of the Bengali milieu are applicable, we need to sensitise ourselves to the existence of 'local particularity', of the 'difference' that the inhabitants of a 'backward' periphery were often morbidly self-conscious about, and which influenced their interactions - with the colonisers as well as with other groups among the colonised. In this light, the work on other relatively 'marginal' publics by

---

[74] B.C. Allen, E.A. Gait, C.G.H. Allen, H.F. Howard, *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam*, Calcutta, 1911 (reprint Delhi, 1993), p.584.
[75] The Gosains of the Auniati, Dakhinpat and Kamalabari satras at Majuli.
[76] Revenue and Agriculture Proceedings 'A', Nos. 22-24, March 1894; Memorial regarding Re-assessment of Assam Valley Districts, NAI.
[77] The *Administrative Report* of 1933-4 recorded that 'the Goramur Gosain was one of the chief sponsors of the Provincial Anti-Untouchability League'. *Assam Administrative Report*, 1933-4, Shillong 1935, i. The Garamur satra is now presently much worse off than its other Majuli counterparts such as Auniati, partly because its Gosain's activities during the Civil Disobedience Movement caused the British to confiscate a large amount of its land.
[78] Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, Delhi, 1997, p.232.

Vasudha Dalmia and Francesca Orsini on the Hindi heartland serves as an important corrective to an otherwise homogenised picture of Bengali as Indian that a theorist like Partha Chatterjee tends to offer.[79] Bengali in fact, emerged as a category for other groups of Indians to wrestle with, quite as much as with that of the Occidental, in their emerging agenda of unnati.[80]

For the world of British and Ahom interaction that Harakanta had delineated, it was still through the informal networks of patronage and breeding that it staffed its institutions. But, by the second half of the century, as an increasing professionalisation of government structures became prevalent, a system of formal, examination-centred education acquired an all consuming importance as practically the only vehicle for respectable upward mobility. For the young males incorporated into its practices, the first significant shift this signified was away from the domestic and the local, to the wider spaces beyond. Interaction with family, village and caste networks was increasingly overlaid by involvements with friends, teachers and urban life, though the educational process was usually initiated within the domestic space. In his biography of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, his cousin Gunabhiram Barua described how at the age of five, the former, and other boys from the extended family were taught Sanskrit and Bengali, both by male elders and by specially appointed pandits.[81] Similarly, the Ahom publicist, Padmanath Gohain Barua (1871-1964) recollected being started on the Assamese alphabets by his father when he was seven, and proceeded onto reading the Pokhila ('Butterfly') reader and shaping letters on banana leaves with quills at his elder sister's knees. However, going any further into the system entailed a novel degree of interaction with colonial institutions, with a decisive stepping outside of familial boundaries.

As autobiographies such as Padmanath's reveal, the journey into colonial education and chakri necessitated, for the emergent Assamese babu, a degree of acquaintance

---

[79] Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalisation of Hindu Traditions*, Delhi, 1997; Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere*, New Delhi, 2002; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Delhi, 1994.
[80] See Nivedita Mohanty, *Oriya Nationalism*, New Delhi, 1982 and Pragati Mohapatra, "The Making of a Cultural Identity: Language, Literature and Gender in Orissa in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," Unpublished PhD Dissertation, London, 1997.
[81] Gunabhiram Barua, *Anandaram Dhekial Phukanar Jivan Charitra*, Calcutta, 1880, p.25.

with places and people previously strange to him. The dislocation of youths living away from home was becoming a common practice in a province where there were only nine High Schools in 1876. Unlike regions like Bengal where modern educational structures had penetrated earlier and deeper, in Assam, the age at which such institutional schooling commenced remained variable, depending upon whether and when facilities were available. A theme of hardship, sacrifice and emotional dislocation is typical in the narratives of this process. Lambodar Bora (1860-92) had to depend upon his father's teaching until he was twelve, as only then did a school come up in his village. His intelligence then caught the eye of the school inspector, who admitted him to the Sadar Middle School at the nearest town of Tezpur. There, the young boy was forced to fend for himself, living alone in a shed outside a friend's home. His father brought him rice and other provisions from the village, as a market for food grains was virtually nonexistent in most parts of Assam.[82]

By the 1880s, the reports on education mentioned the establishment of boarding houses alongside middle and high schools in various towns, though it took 'some time to overcome prejudices both of departmental staff and of parents of pupils and friends of education, in this matter.' By 1884, nine such houses had been opened, to serve the purpose of the high schools in the towns.[83] Without these, it was very difficult for a boy who lived in the interior of a district to find a lodging in the town where the high school was situated. The government reports surmised that the difficulties regarding accommodation were

> One reason why so large a portion of the high school students are sons of Government officials and of traders residing in the town. A boy who had no relatives or friends to take him in is almost compelled to find shelter in one of the quasi-monastic institutions, which are reported to be generally little better than brothels and dens of vice. Free lodging is supplied at the Government boarding houses, with some servants (water carrier, sweeper and chaukidar) and a master of the school is placed in charge with free quarters assigned to him; but the inmates make their own arrangements as to food and meals.[84]

---

[82] Nanda Talukdar ed., *Lambodar Borar Rasanavali*, Guwahati, 1983, Preface.
[83] *Assam Administrative Report*; 1883-4, Shillong, 1885, pp.180-6.
[84] Ibid.

Even in towns such as Sibsagar or Gauhati where high schools functioned until the University Entrance level, a college education involved a much further journey, all the way to Calcutta. The journey was daunting enough - it could take up to three months before a reliable steamer service started in 1861. Regular twice-weekly steamers taking between a month to six days from Upper Assam to Calcutta and three days from Gauhati to Calcutta were available only from 1881. The railway was introduced in 1881 within the tea growing areas of Upper Assam but it was only from 1911, when the Assam-Bengal Railway was completed, that it provided a significant link with the outside world. A significant material investment was required, further restricting the already circumscribed reach of education with its limitations of class, caste and gender. The means for college education came mostly from a combination of resources of mouzadar fathers and government scholarships (Rs. 20 p.a. for Brahmaputra Valley boys and Rs. 15 p.a. for Surma Valley boys).[85] The government stated often enough that it considered it more economic to provide small grants for the few students who passed the Entrance (only fourteen in 1881) and managed to go on to college in Calcutta than to establish a college in Assam.[86] It was far 'more desirable that the natives of the province...should resort to Bengal to prosecute their studies, and thus enlarge their minds by contact with a higher civilisation, than that an expensive Government college should be maintained for them in Assam'.[87] It was not until 1901 that a persistent demand from the Brahmaputra valley was acceded to, with establishment of the Cotton College at Gauhati.

For the greater part of the nineteenth century, college education in Calcutta was a goal difficult to attain, even among the limited social elite who had availed of the new schools. There were obstacles other than the material or the social to entering this new world, with considerable family reluctance to allow young men to leave familiar boundaries, given that precolonial interaction with other regions was of the most limited kind. After passing the Entrance, Bolinarayan Bora (1852-1927) ran away to Calcutta with the help of a Bengali sanyasi, before his father, an amla of the old school, relented. Even after college, when he won a Gilchrist Scholarship to England, his father forbade him to accept it. For the rest of his life, Bolinarayan's family treated

---

[85] *Assam Administrative Report*, 1884-85, Shillong, 1885, p.190.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

him as an outcaste after his return from England and his marriage to the daughter of the I.C.S. officer Romesh Chandra Dutt.[88] On other occasions, family tradition rather than ritual norms was the stumbling block. Dinanath Bezbarua (1813-95) the last of the hereditary royal physicians had smoothly made the transition into British service, retiring as Extra Assistant Commissioner. But his desire that one of his sons should inherit the traditional physicians' lore from him caused him to oppose his third son Lakshminath's plans to study in a Calcutta college, fearing he too would follow his elder brothers into modern professions after such an exposure to 'English' education.[89] In a sense, such opposition was prescient, since the Western educated sons of both these families would lead the way among the growing numbers of young men breaking with accepted marriage and ritual boundaries.[90]

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, in keeping with the 'advanced' notions, wealth and connections his family possessed, had been one of the first students to proceed Calcutta-wards, in 1841. Given the ample wealth that his father Haliram had amassed as customs farmer to the Ahoms and dubhashi to the British, he could travel in style, on a six hundred maund boat belonging to the Deputy Commissioner of Gauhati, with Brahmin cooks, domestic servants and a Bengali mukhtar, acquiring the sobriquet of 'Assamese Raja' from acquaintances such as the Calcutta merchant Motilal Seal.[91] But the subsequent generations of students who followed him to the metropolis had more modest means, and very little access into Calcutta society. For them, the 'mess' system (a house rented by students from the same district or region, with a common kitchen) became a lifeline socialising them into city mores. Rather than family or caste ties, it was the quasi-domestic space established by networks of expatriates

---

[88] See J.N. Borra, *Bolinarayan Bora: His Life, Work and Musings*, Calcutta, 1967.

[89] But when his elder sons provided the necessary financial backing for their younger brother to study in Calcutta, Dinanath did not forbid Lakshminath's departure. However, he tried to preempt such a situation arising with his youngest son by refusing to allow him to be taught any English at all, declaring that only thus would the boy follow him into their ancestral occupation and its cherished secrets. We shall never know how the latter would have reacted to the precautions taken to keep him away from the new world that his brothers had entered, for he died soon afterwards. The arcane lore of the physicians to the Ahom kings too died with him, as his elder brother somewhat regretfully notes in his autobiography. Lakshminath Bezbarua, "Dangariya Dinanath Bezbaruar Sangsikpta Jivan Charit," in *Bezbarua Granthavali*, Vol. 1, Guwahati, 1988, pp.137-8.

[90] Lakshminath accepted a proposal from the Tagore family to marry Pragyasundari Devi, a granddaughter of Debendranath Tagore. His family was so upset by this that they contemplated filing a case against the Tagores. Bolinarayan married R.C. Dutt's daughter. Gunabhiram married a widow, Bishnupriya Devi.

[91] Gunabhiram Barua, *Anandaram Baruar Jivan Charitra*, p.33.

which eased their adjustment into urban life.[92] This camaraderie of the mess was a formative experience for socialisation into a larger community, as the vivid descriptions in almost every autobiography recount. Padmanath described how a new student would brave the perils of steamer and train travel, eating strange food in wayside hotels to finally proceed to an Assamese mess, its address the only information he possessed about the city. There, the comfort of familiar food and language was backed up by the expertise of seniors in dealing with the perils of university red tape as well as an introduction to the delights of an associational culture aiming at the uplift of mother-tongue and motherland.[93]

The creation of this 'home' within the city fostered a strong sense of 'oneness' of language and heritage for these students, which would later be disseminated into the small towns and villages of Assam. Benedict Anderson's notion of the 'secular pilgrimage' can be applied to this experience of colonial city and educational networks, precipitating a perceptible shift in the mental landscape of this nascent intelligentsia.[94] A striking break between the memoir of Harakanta and that of Padmanath is that while educational experiences and friendship networks were hardly mentioned in the former, these formed the main tropes around which the latter structured his retelling of his life.[95] The move away from a narrative of relationships hinging upon precedence to one that oscillated between family and comradely ties in relationships of affect is a symptom of the new consciousness through which modernity was being negotiated and traversed, by such a community of *chatrasamaj*.[96] John McGuire has theorised that student messes served as an alternative, democratic space for socialisation for the rural and provincial entrants to Calcutta's student life, managed as they were on strictly democratic lines in which everything was decided by the 'voice of the majority'.[97] At the same time, the

---

[92] Similar ties were established between factory labour in Calcutta who came from the same villages or rural districts.

[93] Padmanath Gohain Barua, *Mor Sowarani*, Guwahati, 1968, pp.26-33. For similar experiences for students from Orissa see Nivedita Mohanty, *Oriya Nationalism*, p.78.

[94] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 1991, p.57.

[95] Gohain Barua, *Mor Sowarani*.

[96] John Berwick, "Chatra Samaj: The Significance of the Student Community in Bengal, c.1870-1922," in Rajat Kanta Ray ed., *Mind, Body and Society*, Delhi, 1995, p.232.

[97] John McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind*, Canberra, 1983, p.55. His conclusions are based on the most comprehensive account in English of Calcutta 'mess' culture, in Bipan Chandra Pal's

alienation engendered by city life and Bengali hegemony could only be countered by a stress upon metaphors of affect, centreing around the distant space of the homeland. Even when the bond of the chatrasamaj was dissolved by the imperatives of chakri, that petty humdrum existence could be elevated by the agenda of progress that community togetherness had inaugurated.

3 (6) Opium Sabha vs. Tea Party

For such a community, there was an urgent task close at hand: to rescue the character of Assamese from the opprobrium that colonialism had bestowed on it. That was of an 'indolent sensual non-progressive being,'[98] premised upon local distance from the consumption patterns that the Victorian Englishman had come to regard as the accoutrements of civilisation. The most striking instance of this was the continued attachment of the Assamese to 'a single article of commerce...kanee or opium...consumed by all classes, high and low, rich and poor, old and young, men, women and even children'.[99]

The initial encounter of the British with the Ahom kingdom of Assam had been in the reign of Gaurinath Singha, who had seemed to exemplify two equally pernicious addictions of the indigenous ruling class, to the arbitrary exercise of force and to opium. As Benudhar Sarma reminisced, 'in those days, among the things that denoted a big man, one of them was the use of opium'.[100] By the 1830s, a British medical report surmised that 80% of the Assamese population was addicted to it.[101] While the indigenous notables of that period, dubhashis such as Maniram Barbhandar Barua and Haliram Dhekial Phukan would agree with such a figure, their perspective on opium

---

autobiography describing how managers were elected on a monthly basis by all the students and disputes between members settled by a 'court of the Whole House'. The Bikrampur Mess, at 33 Mussalmanpara Lane, to which Pal belonged, was the most prominent mess for East Bengali students and served as a geographical and organisational base for the Indian Association in 1876 and the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj in 1878. Similarly, Assamese and Oriya students initiated their own associational culture from such Calcutta bases. See Pal, *Memories of my Life and Times*, Calcutta, 1932 (reprint 1973), p.157.

[98] Home Revenue Proceedings, Nos. 8-10, August 1861; Letter from the Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 14 May 1861, NAI.

[99] John Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam during a Residence of Fourteen Years*, London, 1855, p.144.

[100] Jogeswar Sarma ed., *Benudhar Sarmar Rasanavali,* Vol. 1: *Mojiyar Pora Mejoloi*, Guwahati, 1985, p.120.

[101] Foreign Political Proceeding, No. 93 'A', 15 April 1831; Letter from G. Lamb to J. Hutchinson, Secretary to the Medical Board, Dacca, 30 March 1831, NAI.

was a complicated one. We see Maniram, for instance, making a distinction between the precolonial aristocratic consumption of opium as a luxury, imported from beyond Assam's borders, and the subsequent spread of its cultivation and consumption within the region.[102] He asserted in his memorandum to Justice Mills that it was the barkandazes who entered Assam in the eighteenth century who had introduced its cultivation, and subsequently its misuse by the common people. As he indignantly declared, after the Burmese usurpers had removed penalties against opium-eaters, the practice had become universal, adding thousands of new opium-eaters from the 'lower orders', including 'such low people as Doomnees, Gorionees and Meereonees ('wives of Doms, Goriyas and Miris')'.[103] Rather than condemning opium consumption per se, he seemed to be bemoaning its dissemination as yet another sign of the loss of status that the ruling class of the Ahom had suffered.

While medical opinion still held to its necessity in malarial areas, and also advocated its efficacy for stomach remedies, colonial administrators were beginning to delineate the lineaments of opium as a 'social evil'. While they saw it as confirming the Assamese peasant's tendency to indolence, there were interesting echoes of Maniram's argument that opium consumption by women of the lower classes was the ultimate proof of social disorder. However, this moral disapproval would be allied to quite another end, as shown by the arguments the colonial state advanced to justify its banning of opium cultivation in 1861. We have previously seen how a dual set of economic imperatives, for a local labour force for the tea plantations and for increased excise revenue, had combined to bring about this prohibition.[104] In a land where, 'as a rule, ryots do not sell their grain, but store it,' removing the one commercial crop that the peasant was dependent upon for his cash needs, and forcing him to buy his opium for cash, would contribute to creating a market for grain and other produce.[105] Therefore, this measure managed to bring together colonial requirements for two of its most important commodities, both tea and opium. But the rhetoric masking this

---

[102] Haliram Dhekial Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, Calcutta, 1829 (reprint Guwahati, 1962) and Mills, *Report*, Appendix K.B., Translation of a Petition from Moneeram Borwah Dewan.
[103] Mills, *Report*, Appendix K.B., Translation, p.606.
[104] See Chapter 2 of the dissertation.
[105] Note on the Condition of the People of Assam (in reply to confidential circular issued by Government of India); Note 3 by J. Knox Wight, Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar. Assam Secretariat File 824 R, 1888, ASA.

was that of temperance, thrift and industry - all virtues that the native of Assam conspicuously lacked. The district officials, the tea planters and the missionaries of the S.P.G. combined to offer an unanimous opinion which held that entering the market would be the making of the native. Instead of growing opium, he should be required to buy it. Therefore, their tenuous logic went, as his demands from the bazaar grew, so would his investment in civilisation.

While dubhashis such as Haliram Dhekial Phukan had remarked on the increasing prevalence of opium, their focus lay on its transformation from an aristocratic habit to one that was spreading across social classes. But for the new generation of colonial intelligentsia, opium had become the signifier of the weakness the Assamese race had developed, which it was their task to ameliorate. By the second half of the century, a moral campaign against opium took centrestage alongside a crusade for the Assamese language, bringing the American missionary and caste Hindu publicist onto a common platform against colonial policy. In its very first issue, the Orunodoi of 1846 had published an approving report on the Sibsagar Gyan Sabha's meeting against opium.[106] However, it is important not to occlude the different strands in indigenous opinion at this juncture of mid-nineteenth-century Assam. The dangariya and the ryot would remain votaries of opium over the next few decades, out of considerations of both consumption and production. The Gosains' collusion with their peasant tenants who were cultivating opium in 1867 falls into place within this older moral economy where opium occupied the same slot that bhang did in other regions. Over the next few years, the anti-opium campaign in the Orunodoi was undoubtedly lent vigour by the satras' links with the kaniya sabhas ('opium smoking assemblies of devotees').

In 1861, a locally based publicist, Hemchandra Barua carried this critique of indigenous opium consumption to new heights, with his play Kaniyar Kirtan. This was a satire about Kirtikanta, a mouzadar's son whose participation in an opium smokers' assembly, in the company of a lewd woman and a hypocritical bhakat, reduced him to utter poverty. In consequence, he was unable to pay his dues from his mouza to the Government, took recourse to stealing to make up his revenue shortfall,

---

[106] "General Intelligence," Orunodoi, January 1846.

and finally died a repentant death in prison.[107] Hem Barua was an interesting figure - a self-professed atheist, with a minimum of formal education, he articulated a powerful critique of high caste superstition and clerical corruption in an idiom of rational scepticism. Probably inspired by the Victorian temperance tracts circulated by missionaries, his play was the first indigenous effort to bring together a popular tradition of lampooning religious authority with the new elite's critique of a culture of consumption that it saw as morally reprehensible and socially wasteful. Colonial institutions such as the revenue office and the prison frame the narrative of degeneracy and redemption that his satire plays out. This didactic message was enough to get pecuniary assistance from state channels, for the first edition from Utsavananda Goswami, Deputy Inspector of Schools, and for a subsequent imprint from A.C. Campbell, the personal assistant to the Commissioner of Assam.[108] Some years later, Hem Barua's other literary creation, the Hem Kosha dictionary or the 'Assamese Webster', would again manage to tap the largesse of colonial functionaries to enter the world of print,to ameliorate Assamese.[109]

Such a trajectory underscores the complexities of institutional attitudes to opium consumption, whereby the state had taken over the role of opium procurer, with an ostensible agenda of curtailing consumption, but in reality, producing exactly the reverse. Prohibitionist opinion in the metropole would bring in a Royal Commission to enquire into the issue in 1893. After interviewing a host of individuals and organisations, the Commission preferred to revert to the status quo, declaring that 'the movement in England in favour of active interference on the part of the Imperial Parliament for the suppression of the opium habit in India has proceeded from an exaggerated impression as to the nature and extent of the evil to be controlled'.[110] This conclusion was borne out by the fact that even within the new vernacular sphere, Assamese opinion was not united in characterising opium as a social ill. As late as 1884, the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, whose first two presidents were the Ahom aristocrat Raja Naranarayan Singha and the revenue official turned tea entrepreneur

---

[107] Hem Barua, *Kaniyar Kirtan*, Sibsagar, 1861.
[108] Ibid, Preface.
[109] P.R.T. Gurdon and Hemchandra Goswami ed., *Hem Kosha*, Guwahati, 1900.
[110] Sessional Papers of the House of Commons, 1895, XLII, *Final Report of the Royal Commission on Opium*, p.94. Also see Royal Commission on Opium, *Report and Minutes of Evidences* 1892-3, Vols. 1-7, London, 1894.

Jagannath Barua[111] sent in an appeal on behalf of 'ryots' for a revocation of the opium cultivation ban, in order to avoid the revenue shortfall being made up by increased rates.[112] Nonetheless, its consumption was gradually coming to acquire the resonance of a dying way of life, the last hurrah of the dangariya.

The sign of the future was set once again by the Calcutta based chatrasamaj, in 1872, with the organisation of the Assamese Students' Literary (A.S.L.) Club, soon to rename itself as the Assamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha (ABUSS - 'Society for the Progress and Regeneration of the Assamese Language'), aiming at a 'renaissance' of Assamese language, literature and society.[113] The initial seed of this had lain, as Benudhar Sarma recollected, in a weekly 'tea-party' with the intention of socialising with other students from the homeland and providing an informal training in public speaking and deportment. Over the next few decades, such tea-drinking sessions gradually spread into the homeland, ousting the kaniya sabha of the caste Hindu (though not the rice beer of the tribal peasant). Significantly, while the basis for participating in the older type of sabha had been the common bond of allegiance to a Gosain, now it was the tie of language community for its new prototype. To some extent, the Orunodoi had presaged such developments by its numerous pieces extolling the ingredients of colonial modernity ranging from voluntary associations such as the Gyan Sabha, and the use of tea and coffee as alternative modes of civility. But the young men of the ABUSS, as they entered the world of chakri, as clerks, schoolteachers or aspiring tea planters, even, in the districts of Assam, began to

---

[111] Jagannath Barua was a well known figure, not just as a planter, but also as B.A. Jagannath, the first graduate from Upper Assam. On behalf of the ASL Club, he and another young Calcutta student Manik Chandra Barua had sent an address to the new Viceroy in 1872 after Lord Mayo's assassination, probably the first such public communication at an all-India level from Assam. In 1902, Jagannath, by now a Rai Bahadur, went to England for the coronation of Edward VII as a representative of Assam. His speech at a banquet given by the Mayor of London was reported in The Manchester Guardian, The Sheffield Independent and other newspapers. The subjects he spoke on were the history of Assam, the French Revolution, and the physical circumstances of a country with regard to its civilization. Jagannath was the main force behind the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha which represented most of the Upper Assam gentry until the end of the nineteenth century. It gradually lost ground to newer organisations with more broad ranging aspirations such as the Assam Association. See Jogeswar Sarma ed., *Benudhar Sarmar Rasanavali,* Vol.2: *Buranjir Saphura*, Guwahati, 1985, p.85.

[112] Memorial of the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, Appendix XXXVI, Royal Commission on Opium, Vol. 2, p.462.

[113] In 1870s, Calcutta had seen the development of a number of associations operating in the vernacular, such as the Society for Improvement of Bengali Language and Literature founded in 1874, the Hindu Literary Society in 1875, and the Calcutta Literary Society in 1876. See McGuire, *The Making*, p.74.

proselytise against opium at the same time as they preached for a love of mother-tongue.[114]

By the early years of the twentieth century, in a development unforeseen by those missionary temperance advocates, opium would become the essential link between all-India Gandhian nationalism and endeavours by local elites to reform an indolent Assamese jati. Jyotiprasad Agarwala was the grandson of the pioneering Keya-turned-Assamiya, Haribilas Agarwala, who had invested his profits from opium trading in establishing a tea garden – the former became a major figure among the nationalists campaigning for freedom from opium addiction and foreign rule.[115] While school and college students would harangue their women, elders, villagers, 'tribal' and coolie brethren against this 'social evil', an innovative mail-order trade advertised remedies for opium addiction on the book jackets of the cheap vernacular publications circulating through Assam. By the 1920s, the Congress campaign against opium received prominent coverage in the region's first vernacular newspaper, the Assamiya. The newspaper's articles drew parallels for the Assamese people with the larger international battle against opium spearheaded by the League of Nations, and with popular struggles against the drug in China. Rather than tea, it was opium which had emerged as the vehicle for the Assamese imagination to locate itself within a global community achieving modernity through 'self-strengthening'.[116]

3 (7) The Rebirth of Sankardeb

In the 1870s, the Assamese chatrasamaj in Calcutta created the first self-consciously 'literary' texts for modern Assamese, under the aegis of the Assamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha (ABUSS), established for 'the unnati of the Assamese language'.[117] This organisation subsequently sprouted branches all over Assam, as its members

---

[114] That generational gap was indicated in this remark by the Deputy Inspector of Education for Nowgong district that 'Every pathsala boy is taught to hate opium eating and I have never come to know of any instance of a schoolboy being addicted to that vicious habit.' Cited in C.A. Martin, *General Report on Public Instruction in Assam*, 1876-77, Shillong, 1878, p.14.

[115] Haribilas had run a lucrative opium shop on his plantation, though he did give evidence to the Royal Commission advocating a gradual reduction of opium.

[116] In Java of the same period, opium smoking, like polygamy and betel chewing, became a mark of being old fashioned, if not uncivilised. [Though the betel habit did not acquire the same negative implication in Assam.] Chinese chambers of commerce and affiliated organisations too were active in anti-opium propaganda. See James R. Rush, "Opium in Java: A Sinister Friend," The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 54, (3), May 1985, pp.549-61.

[117] See Chapters 2 and 4 of the dissertation.

returned to jobs in the government or on plantations in their homeland. Language and literature were becoming 'the means to define and communicate the agenda for progress, and were themselves metaphors for the jati/nation: the strength of literature showed the strength of the nation, the life of the language was the life of the nation'.[118] However, the biggest problem for this new vernacular milieu was its relative lack of capital, both symbolic and material.

While the new literati did try to harness what remained of traditional patronage, this had fairly limited scope.[119] The wealth and authority of the major satras, their traditional connections to scholarship and their organic ties with the intelligentsia had meant that they were involved to some extent in the new print culture.[120] The publicist Hemchandra Goswami (1872-1928), who himself hailed from a satra family, took a leading role in obtaining such patronage, as for instance, in obtaining the donations for the Asom Sahitya Sabha established in 1917.[121] The Auniati Gosain's Dharma Prakash Press was instituted as a reaction to, even an imitation of the new kind of cultural patronage that the missionaries had initiated. But given the lack of a viable machinery of production and distribution, the serial productions from the satra could not be sustained.[122] Even other local ventures to set up presses and newspapers were conspicuously unsuccessful, until well into the next century.[123]

---

[118] Francesca Orsini, "The Hindi Public Sphere," Unpublished PhD Dissertation, London, 1997, p.5.
[119] Jogeswar Sarma ed., *Buranjir Saphura*, pp.41-54 for a 1899 letter from Hem Chandra Goswami to Benudhar Sarma which mentioned that the Cooch Behar Raja was proposing to publish an Assamese version of the Mahabharata.
[120] The Majuli Gosains provided grants to many young men from respectable families to pursue higher education in Calcutta, for instance. Cited by Manorama Sharma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam*, Delhi, 1990, pp.124-5.
[121] Hem Chandra Goswami was the son of Dambarudhar Goswami of the Gauranga Satra near Nowgong. He was educated at Calcutta where he was among the founders of the ABUSS. After a career in administrative posts, he retired as an Extra Assistant Commissioner. He took a prominent role in assisting E.A. Gait and P.R.T. Gurdon in their quest for Assamese manuscripts. Ratneswar Mahanta was the son of a minor Satradhikar, but after his father's early death, suffered considerable financial hardship, and therefore lacked the college education other contemporaries received.
[122] It is only from brief mentions in the *Administrative Reports* for the province that we can trace the existence of these periodicals. For instance, the 1888-9 report mentions 'One new paper, a monthly Assamese, Assam Tara printed at the Dharma Prakash Press at the Auniati Satra in Sibsagar, and treats of religious, historical and literary subjects.' Earlier, in 1883-4, it had reported the demise of the Assam Bilasini from the same press. Extracts from these papers are absent from the RNP reports.
[123] The Assam News Press and the Chidananda Press at Gauhati and the Hitasadhini Press at Goalpara were briefly functioning during the later part of the nineteenth century.

In the absence of a self-sustaining reading public for the improving texts they were bringing out, the intelligentsia was forced to rely on its own slender resources, and the education department's requirement for vernacular texts, to print its works.[124] However, another genre of Assamese text did appear in fairly large numbers, both from jobbing Calcutta presses[125] and the Assam ones. The literary genealogies constructed for modern Assamese have mostly ignored the fact that the most common genre of Assamese books appearing in print from the 1870s was not the literary or social reformist texts that the missionaries and intelligentsia had championed. Instead, it typically involved the transmutation of an older kind of text, the local versions of Vaishnavite scriptures such as the Bhagavat Purana. Contemporary local scholarship with its preoccupation with 'high' literature has tended to ignore these, except perhaps as indicators of religious fervour. But the steady flow of such texts in an otherwise inhospitable location for vernacular print entrepreneurship would seem to indicate the existence of a reading public that was eager for such works, though not as yet for sufficient numbers of other, more literary ones.[126] While the satras had continued to produce handwritten manuscripts of religious commentaries, these had a limited reach. It was another variety of religious work, the cheap editions of devotional

---

[124] This would include the neo-buranjis by Gunabhiram Barua (chosen by the Nowgong Textbook Committee in 1879) and Padmanath Gohain Barua, as well as didactic works such as the *Hitopadesa* by Tulsiram Sarma Bejbarua, 1884, written in response to the prize offered by the government for works suitable for use as Assamese primers in schools, after the vernacular's introduction in schools after 1874. In the 1920s, a literary 'entrepreneur' would bemoan the fact that 'the progress of Assamese literature [is] seriously hampered by the numerical inferiority of the reading public...The Assamese author publishes a book at a loss, and he is naturally shy in repeating his financially unprofitable experiment by publishing another book. .To ensure a large circulation of his book, the author has to adjust the manner and matter of his writings to suit the mind of all readers ranging from the most highly educated scholar down to his semi-illiterate countrymen...To the impediments mentioned above we must add the absence of a city containing a large population in a concentrated form. An author or publisher in Calcutta can expect a fair sale of his book if it be catered from house to house. Many will not buy it, but there will always be a section whose patronage will be sufficient to secure a fair return for the expenses of publication. The Bengali press can confer a publicity upon the book which can never be obtained for a book in Assam. In Assam the book trade is mainly carried on by the VP system. So, for a man to get a book delivered to him at his door, he will have to spend as postage alone an additional sum of 6 annas, thus raising the cost of the book from 8 to 14 annas.' See S.K. Bhuyan, *Studies in the Literature of Assam*, Guwahati, 1965, pp.21-2.

[125] The most frequently used press for Assamese publications, judging from the books that have survived, was the Samya Press at 6, College Square, Calcutta.

[126] One example of such a text is the *Bhagavatratna*, Jorhat, 1874, which stated that it was propounding the principles of dharma as expounded by the Auniati Gosain, and the *Gunamala*, published from the same Dharma Prakash press in 1872. Another producer of religious books of this kind was the Chidananda Press at Guwahati, for instance the *Bhaktiratnasindhu* which was published in 1875.

scriptures and commentaries, which was becoming the most common printed material entering the Assamese home.[127]

Significantly, this dissemination of the textual message of Vaishnavism appears to have gone hand in hand with a gradual dilution of the 'godly' veneration of the Gosains. Popular oral culture had never desisted from lampooning the stock figure of the bhakat, the epitome of greed and corruption.[128] But this took on a new form, both in its permeation into the writings by contemporary publicists,[129] and in its extension to the previously inviolate figure of the Gosain or Mahanta.[130] Gradually, the awe inspired by the Gosain was becoming as much a phenomenon of the past as the Ahom dangariya. Those older forms of authority were being well and truly transformed within the new cultural and social relations coalescing around them. In terms of representation, a symbolic shift was happening, from the realm of a localised shrine-based system to the more abstruse, temporally distant past of a historicised founder of a religious faith.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, both colonial and indigenous accounts of Assam had given significantly more mention to the satras and their powerful heads, the Gosains or Satradhikars, than to the eponymous founder of a Vaishnavite sect, Sankardeb.[131] In his report on lakhiraj tenures to Justice Mills, Captain Jenkins had commented only as an aside that 'the religious institutions of Nowgong are generally shasters following the doctrines of the Vishnunvitas as taught by Sonkor Acharje in Assam, and Choitonyo and Madhob in Bengal'.[132] A fuller account came from the missionary, Miles Bronson, after a visit to the sage's birthplace, Bordowa 'Than', whose temple had been built in the eighteenth century under royal patronage. 'The story of the brahmin at the head of the establishment is that Krishna was incarnated in

---

[127] I make this deduction on the basis of the large numbers of such texts that have survived (and been ignored by historians and literary scholars) in archives, compared to the fewer overtly 'high culture' productions in Assamese. The former were proportionately more from local presses than the latter, which were mostly from presses in Calcutta, where their authors, mostly leading a student existence, were presumably based.

[128] See various collections of proverbs such as the one compiled by P.R.T. Gurdon, *Assamese Proverbs*, Shillong, 1920 and P.C. Barua, *Assamese Proverbs*, Guwahati, 1963.

[129] Hem Barua, *Kaniyar Kirtan*; Gunabhiram Barua, *Ram-Navami Natak*, Calcutta, 18[illegible].

[130] Lakshminath Bezbarua, "Khohota Dimarur Satradhikar", in the collection *Barbaruar Buloni*, and "Nomal"; both in *Bezbaruar Granthavali*, Vol. 2, Guwahati, 1988, pp.1323-7 and pp.1041-8.

[131] This is apart from the specific genre of devotional hagiography, of which there were many examples.

[132] Mills, *Report*, p.86.

the form of a man called Sonko; that he gave directions that the place should be sacred to his worship, and leaving the impression of his foot on a stone, commanded that it should be preserved sacred and worshipped.'[133] Bronson caustically observes that the colonial regime was following its Ahom predecessors in extending the prestige of this site.

> There is a great attempt at show and an increasing attempt to obtain for it a celebrity as a holy place, like that of Benares and other places; which has been encouraged by people being sent from the courts to swear at this place. Even several magistrates have been known to lend their influence to supporting the popular superstition, by requiring their witnesses to swear at this temple that they speak the truth.[134]

Despite Bronson's fears, it was not until the last part of the century, as the census reports and vernacular texts by indigenous publicists testify, that Sankardeb came into the prominence that his 'successors', the Gosains had already enjoyed. The first salvo in this campaign was fired by the members of the ABUSS with their campaign to correct an 'official misrepresentation of Assam's history', that had relegated the region's religious and cultural founding father to a subordinate position. These efforts were successful, as the Census Report for 1911 made clear.

> One point in connection with the Vaishnavism of Assam is worth considering, i.e., whether Sankar Deb its founder, drew inspiration from Chaitanya, the great reformer of Bengal, as stated in the last two Census Reports of Assam. The Society for the Improvement of the Assamese Language, Gauhati, has taken up the issue and strongly objects to the accounts hitherto given. It claims that Sankar Deb was anterior to Chaitanya in birth and reforms.[135]

Assamese was declared to be 'a sister of Bengali and not a daughter', with a common origin from Sanskrit, in the manner of Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and Bengali. In the same vein, the intelligentsia saw it incumbent upon them to trace Assamese Vaishnavism's roots to Sankardeb's sojourn in North India, rather than from the Chaitanya lineage of Bengal. While the intelligentsia's writings were laying the basis for the 'modern age' of Assamese literature, they portrayed themselves as worthy successors to the fifteenth century reformers, Sankardeb and Madhabdeb. It was these savants' versions of Vaishnavite scriptures that were pinpointed as the origin for the

---

[133] Journal of Miles Bronson, 15 February, 1843, in H.K. Barpujari, *The American Missionaries*, p.46.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Quoted by B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers*, Vol. 7: *Sibsagar*, Allahabad, 1906, p.95.

Assamese language and literature being 'recovered' for the new nation. While the intelligentsia was enthusiastically participating in the imagining of an Indic landscape encompassing previously marginal sites such as Assam, we can detect a simultaneous desire for local particularity which made it necessary to assert difference, particularly with the hegemonic Bengali cultural sphere. While the sacral site of Brindaban, for instance, was perfectly acceptable as the location of Sankardeb's religious apprenticeship, Bengal was emphatically not. An intelligentsia which was imagining its own roots as being in Kanauj was eager to affiliate itself to North India, i.e. Aryavarta in a manner which its very contemporary rivalry with Bengal could not permit.

There are other interesting elisions in this teleology that need to be examined. The Sankardeb tradition had been written mostly in the devotional mode of Brajbuli - a fact that these first 'histories' of Assamese literature do acknowledge, but in a rather back-handed manner. While the affiliation to Braj allowed them to stress the purity of the local Vaishnavite tradition in the larger Indic mainstream, its dominance still had to be underplayed, in order to arrive at a lengthy enough lineage for Assamese to challenge the dialect status that it had only recently escaped. Thus, the Assam News stated

> Our language will not suffer at their hands. The religious books are in this language. So long as there will be Hindu religion and Hindu society, Assamese will be the language of Assam. Our Brahmins, Gosains, Medhis, Gaonburhas and others will never show their back towards their fatherland, mother tongue and ancestral religion by reading a few pages of the Brahmo Sangit or Tattvakoamudee instead of reading their Dasham, Kirtan, Ghosha etc. Government may set aside Assamese, but the Assamese will never do so.[136]

This statement has to be read in terms of its dual stress upon 'our language' and 'ancestral religion'. For the most part, the intelligentsia chose to highlight the 'original works of genius' that they were producing, and their indebtedness to the 'ancient' creator of a distinctive Assamese language and religion, Sankardeb. While the intelligentsia prided itself on devotion to what it portrayed as the unique heritage of Assamese Hinduism, at the same time, the pomp and authority of the satras, their oppressive charges upon their disciples and their rigidity towards Sudra castes did

---

[136] RNP, 1889.

also provoke attack as deviations from the egalitarian faith of the original founders.[137] At the turn of the century, Sankardeb had begun his journey, in the writings by Assamese publicists, from text to heroic ancestor.

This ambivalent attitude to religious institutions is exemplified by one of the iconic figures of Assamese nationalism, Lakshminath Bezbarua. His autobiography makes amply clear his devout faith in Vaishnavite religion, stemming from his father's close links with the Kamalabari Satra.[138] In Calcutta, we find that the adult Lakshminath chose to keep his distance from the institutional moorings of established Vaishnavism, and instead embarked upon a recovery of its past, through a number of writings celebrating the founder Sankardeb's life and teachings.[139] His personal contacts with the Adi Brahmo Samaj through his Tagore in-laws appear to have been the inspiration behind his emphasis upon the Vedantic basis of the former. In 1910, Lakshminath published a long essay, "Assamiya Bhasa aru Sahitya" in his periodical, the Bahi. This was essentially an attempt at tracing a history of the Assamese jati by affiliating it to the 'ancient' Hindus of Bharatvarsha. The narrative had an ambitious scope, beginning in what he saw as 'the remote past before the Kurukshetra war', when Assam was inhabited by people of the 'Dravidi race'. It culminated in a description of the Assamese Hindus of his own time.[140]

For our purposes, it is the penultimate section of this text that is of import, covering the period between the mid-fifteenth until the mid-sixteenth centuries. He began by characterising it as the 'Age of revival of learning and Renaissance in Assam, as in Europe'.[141] This, incidentally, seems to be an appropriation of Bankim's well known use of the category 'Renaissance' to characterise Bengal of the same period.[142] Lakshminath contextualised this within an extensive discussion of 'the discovering and conquering of lands, voyaging around the world, creating science and literature

---

[137] Exact dates are notoriously difficult to establish, but by the first part of the twentieth century, the non-Brahmin dominated Sankardeb Samaj had established itself as a counter to the position of the satras, to retrieve the message of Sankardeb from their grasp. It tried to create an alternate way of life for its followers, with a marriage ceremony, for instance, where no Brahmin priest was present.
[138] Lakshminath Bezbarua, *Mor Jivan Sowaran*, Guwahati, 1944, p.10.
[139] Lakshminath Bezbarua, "Nomal" in *Granthavali*, p.1046.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Sarkar, *Writing*, p.161 and p.199.

that made up the European renaissance'.[143] However, a unique position was asserted for India, since in 'dharmapran Bharatvarsha', this renaissance was naturally of a different order, with its main emphasis on the 'reformation of gyan vidya and dharma sanskar, and its propagation'. 'Everything for Hindus is mingled with dharma, so how is it surprising that their renaissance and reformation is in the nature of dharmapran?'[144] The title of Lakshminath's essay now falls into place, since by his logic, *Bhasha* and Sahitya were an integral part of the reformation of dharma that he was outlining. He ended his account with a litany of spiritual leaders, from Buddha and Shankarcharya, Ramanuj and Ramanand, Kabir and Sankardeb. This 'renaissance of the Arya Hindu' thus climaxed in what Lakshminath hailed as the 'Sankari Reformation of Assam', integrating the region into the mainstream of Aryavarta.[145]

It is only when we explore the wider dimensions of Lakshminath's writings that we can glimpse the realignment of 'sanskriti' and 'dharma' that he was setting in motion, with living gurus being discarded in favour of those from the past. His best known writings had been his satirical pieces, published in the Jonaki, written under the nom de plume of a bumbling figure called Kripabor Barua, apparently on the model of Bankim Chandra Chatterji's satirical character, Kamalakanta.[146] The Kripabor essays, with the merciless fun they made of corrupt Satradhikars, earned him a stinging rebuke from the Auniati Gosain and definitively cut off the satra patronage for the periodicals with which he was associated.[147] At the same time, this iconoclastic satirist was carving out the contours of a modern neo-Vaishnavite dharma, through a series of essays on devotional themes, brief biographies of its founders and historical pieces on the founding of the satras. Lakshminath's public celebrations of Vaishnavite festivals at his Calcutta and Sambalpur homes,[148] clearly deriving inspiration from his Tagore in-laws' commemoration of such occasions, served to popularise a new form of public ritual, focusing on a commemoration of the individual saint. From the early decades of the twentieth century, an emerging Assamese nation would congregate

---

[143] Lakshminath Bezbarua, "Nomal" in *Granthavali*, p.1047.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Lakshminath Bezbarua, "Kripabor Baruar Kakotor Tupula," in *Bezbarua Granthavali*, Vol. 2, Guwahati, 1988, pp.1235-70.
[147] Benudhar Sarma, *Buranjir Saphura*, Letter from Auniati Gosain to Hem Chandra Goswami, 1890.
[148] Accounts of these celebrations in almost every memoir by an Assamese who studied in Calcutta during those years, as well as his daughters. See Maheswar Neog ed., *Lakshminath Bezbarua: the Sahityarathi of Assam*, Guwahati, 1972.

around new forms of fete, ranging from the harvest celebration of the Bihu to the 'historical' imagery around Jaymati *Utsav* to the devotional faith expressed upon the *tithi* ('anniversary') of Sankardeb and his disciples. In its print productions, the use of the indigenous Saka era had already been supplemented by the Western calendar, but now there was to be a resurgence of the Sankari mode of reckoning time that only devotional literature had previously used.[149]

In 1934, Lakshminath was invited to present a series of lectures about Sankardeb before the Gaekwad of Baroda.[150] This was hoped to be the beginning of a transformation for Assam, from its association with 'opium-eaters' and 'lawless barbarians from the hills' to the 'land of Sankari Bhakti' in the discourse of National Integration. Sankardeb was to become the symbol of the region's dharma, a long religious and cultural tradition that Assamese nationalism would assert as their share in the trans Indian recovery of Bhakti traditions. The role of the satras was being transformed. They were being recycled as custodians of that cultural heritage, rather than the repositories of political and economic power they had been. Lakshminath and his contemporaries had brought about a definite rupture with an older kind of identity, one that had depended upon an established relationship with sacred geography and ritual boundaries. This was being replaced by one that sought its certainties in affiliating itself to the new category of nation, though paradoxically placing itself within an invented archaism of India as nation.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the shifting relationship between the new regime and local groups in the light of the gradual expansion of the notions of 'contract' and 'good government' as the basis for British authority. Local lords who were the upholders of a social order based on cosmological concepts, and who maintained right order

---

[149] For instance, in the *Assam Buranji* written by the publisher entrepreneur Harinarayan Dutta Baruah in 1924, he used the Sankari era to date his introductory remarks. Also, in his text, he amplified on previous efforts by Gunabhiram Barua and Padmanath Gohain Barua with a new historical section about Sankardeb. His new book enterprise, the Barua Agency, had among its first products a number of printed editions of devotional texts. See Harinarayan Dutta Barua, *Assam Buranji-path*, Guwahati, 1924, Preface and pp.30-5.

[150] Lakshminath Bezbarua, *History of Vaishnavism in India and Rasalila of Shri Krishna: the Baroda Lectures*, Calcutta, 1934.

through ritual action, were being converted into 'landlords'.[151] British administrators were adept in resolving the practical issues of rule by cementing their links with local power structures and networks of authority, a process which in turn helped to legitimise and sustain the latter. In the Assam Valley with its ryotwari land tenure, rural authority tended to concentrate around the Gosains of the satras, and the elite section among them were able to negotiate on the basis of their ritual and social standing with the state in order to recoup and in some cases, even better their situation under the precolonial regime. Meanwhile, another elite group, the service gentry, was consolidating the gains it had made during the latter part of Ahom rule, in the new milieu of the British. While its administrative expertise and disposition towards literacy allowed it a flexibility which the older warrior elite lacked, this service gentry was itself being transmuted by the specifics of colonial modernity into an intelligentsia.

The chapter traces the connections between the region and the larger spaces of the colonial metropolis by examining how the exigencies of colonial administrative logic were creating Calcutta as an important force in the making of colonial middle classes from all over Eastern India. Its place at the heart of the institutional networks of education and print were the primary determinants for the former, with the agenda of progress and the 'public' taking firm root alongside institutional spaces, operating as both concrete and discursive territory. Within this urban space, the colonial intelligentsia was seeking to affiliate itself to a larger Indic identity, while simultaneously articulating a fairly early form of cultural particularity, through connective networks of literature, language, social reform and redeployed devotionalism. In this process, the chapter has shown how the Gosain as the arbiter of social and religious authority was gradually being displaced by the more abstract, overarching systems of print and urban associational culture that the intelligentsia was creating. In as much as the Gosains could affiliate themselves to this process through some amount of cultural and economic patronage, as well as the organic links with many publicists' families, they were an integral part of the modern landscape for Assamese that was being created. However, on the whole, Sankardeb would become a much more potent symbol of 'local particularity' to add to the pan-Indian pantheon of

---

[151] See Cohn, "Representing Authority," p.173.

heroic spiritual icons, and in the cultural arena of post-colonial Assam, 'Satriya' would be recast as 'Sanskriti' rather than as a living authority system.

IV Language-as-Literature, Language-as-Identity

Introduction

This chapter explores some of the debates about language conducted between indigenous elites, missionaries and colonial administrators in South Asia. These 'dialogic interactions' served to transform a newly standardised print vernacular into the most potent emblem of being Assamese. They were part of the wider process where colonial intelligentsias were actively advocating the cause of *matri-bhasha*, a language of home and hearth, as most suitable for administration and public expression. South Asia was a world where numerous 'mother-tongues' had existed side by side even within a relatively small geocultural space of a particular region. Therefore, a strategy of allotting public privilege to one language above its neighbours involved portraying it as natural and timeless through a vocabulary of historical and emotional entitlement. As Ramaswamy points out, conceptions about a language among its interested speakers are rarely neutral or innocent - they are 'partial, contestable and contested, and interest-laden'. Disguising their historicity, these conceptions present themselves as eternally true; hiding their cultural specificity, they masquerade as universally valid and commonsensical.[1]

In Assam, this meant ordering a region with a diverse and uneven linguistic repertoire into a model where language/nation uniformity would be the ideal form of existence. Within the public arenas that this chapter examines, a language-for-literature was consciously chosen, rather than being naturally given.[2] This process of selection was articulated in the form of a debate about the relative merits of different indigenous vernaculars. Ironically, the publicists participating in these debates made only elliptical reference to English within this debate, thus eliding the degree to which it alone was becoming a truly empowered language in the cultural landscape of South Asia.

---

[1] Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil Nadu, 1891-1970*, Berkeley, 1997, pp.7-8.
[2] Sheldon Pollock, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular", The Journal of Asian Studies, 57, (1), February 1988, p.7.

The chapter traces how the transition from a precolonial service gentry to a modern intelligentsia in Assam was intimately bound up with these shifting ideas about the nature of language and its relationship to social identity. It shows how the cultural practices of the early nineteenth century were characterised by fluid shifts in register and idiom, contingent upon the situation in which language was being used. But a pivotal change came about when the publicists of the next generation regarded it as imperative to have a single language for family, literature and nation. An important step towards this objective was the establishment of the Asom Sahitya Sabha ('Assam Literary Academy') - an institutional authority on language-as-literature, following examples from other regions of South Asia.[3] The Sahitya Sabha's ideology was clearly articulated at its inaugural session in 1917 when its first president Padmadhar Gohain Barua declared that, 'for the nation that does not possess a literature, its language is nothing but a dialect, only one rung higher than the cries of birds and animals'.[4] The corollary of this being that if your language was relegated to the status of a dialect, then yours was not a nation at all.

The chapter examines how this quest for language status, as opposed to that of dialect, influenced the notions about land and people being articulated in Assam. It emphasises how these shifts in discursive practice were aligned against a background of changes in the educational apparatus, employment opportunities, and political institutions, through the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. It is in this light that it considers the construction of a past of glorious achievement, and a present of affective networks, within a geocultural landscape of Assamese, where linguistic commonality could be the key ingredient of identity. The hegemony desired for one language was accompanied, inevitably, by a series of inclusions and exclusions, on lines of caste, tribe, gender and class. Within the body space of Assam, 'lesser' languages, and the people who owed allegiance to them, were subjected to a process

---

[3] The Bengal Academy of Literature or the Bangiya Sahitya Sabha was inaugurated in 1893 under the auspices of Raja Binaya Krishna Bahadur, Mr. L. Litotard, and the late Babu Ksheterapal Chakravarty. Their original objective was to make the Bengali language known among Western savants and to arouse their interest in it. The business was at first conducted in English, with reports of Orientalists such as Max Mueller and J. Beames taking an interest in the Academy, but owing to the strong opinion of almost all the Bengali authors, the use of English was later discontinued. From Subir Ray Choudhuri ed., *Early History and Growth of Calcutta*, Calcutta, 1905, p.98

[4] Atulchandra Hazarika ed., *Asom Sahitya Sabhar Bhasanavali*, Vol. 1, Jorhat, 1955.

of subordination due to their seeming inability to enter into the absolute commitment that Assamese was coming to demand.

4 (1) Language encounters between coloniser and colonised

Recent scholarship has strongly avowed that cultural collision was unavoidable when the nineteenth-century British set out to 'civilise' Indian society, given the baggage carried by the colonisers- their Enlightenment-derived inheritance which privileged spoken and written language as a system of social communication.[5] As Umberto Eco asserts, most Western Europeans of this period accepted that part of the Greek classical tradition where the concept of logos associated words with reason.[6] In a way, the language project the British undertook in South Asia was an appropriation of Europe's 'search for the perfect language' which had preoccupied intellectuals since the days of Dante and his 'illustrious vernacular'.[7] The notion of 'mother-tongue' as a natural human attribute emerged in the heady air of cinquecento Italy,[8] and over the following centuries, it inexorably affiliated itself to another new concept, that of 'nation'. However, what Europeans encountered in South Asia was its precolonial conceptual framework for language which had taken quite a different course from that of Western Europe.

David Washbrook has pointed out how for the societies Westerners encountered in South Asia, a common spoken and written language represented but one, and a relatively minor medium through which social information was conveyed. Indeed, there was widespread acceptance of the fact that most social contexts contained large clusters of people who could not, or would not, communicate through a common spoken language.[9] This was one of the most perplexing aspects for the administrator or missionary who arrived in a region such as Assam. The sense of alterity they felt was partly sought to be conveyed by placing its language culture within a distant

---

[5] See David Washbrook, "Language, Culture and Society in India," in Penelope Corfield ed., *Language, History and Class*, Oxford, 1991, pp.179-203.
[6] Umberto Eco's *The Search for the Perfect Language*, Oxford, 1995 explores an array of language hypotheses prevalent in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe, but as his work shows, those remained the preserve of select groups of theorists.
[7] Ibid, p.35.
[8] The term 'mother-tongues' or 'matrices linguae', was first coined by Giuseppe Giusto Scaligero, in *Diatribe de Europaeorum Linguis*, 1599. Ibid, p.86.
[9] Washbrook, "Language," pp.179-180.

cognitive frame. As the American missionary Nathan Brown vexedly noted, 'as many dialects are spoken...as were heard at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.'[10] Failing such scriptural precedents in our mode of thinking, South Asian systems of language and linguistic usage need to be located against the loose and contentious state and social structures of the precolonial period.[11] Javed Majeed has indicated how the use of different languages for administrative and other writing purposes, quite apart from the myriad spoken varieties, was the usual situation all over the sub-continent until the 1830s. At the same time, a variable political context dictated that shifts in allegiance periodically disrupted the hierarchies within which different administrative idioms were located.[12]

In late medieval Assam, ujani Assamiya, the dominant idiom around Sibsagar, the heartland of the Ahom kingdom, had also emerged as the primary written language.[13] This accompanied a state-building process where a 'Sanskritising' Ahom regime, in its transition from clan to region hegemony, added more and more of Indic cultural ingredients to its public image. Concomitantly, its own Tai language productions were displaced into the esoteric realms of astrology and divination. By the late seventeenth century, most of the courtly patronage for written texts was directed towards the Assamiya vernacular[14] that philology would subsequently discover to be of 'Sanskritic' parentage.[15] At the same time, this written register easily fluctuated according to use – the Assamiya used in the buranji chronicles produced under court

---

[10] Journal of Nathan Brown, 1841, in H.K. Barpujari, ed., *The American Missionaries in Northeast India: 1836-1900, A Documentary Study*, Guwahati, 1986, p. 77.
[11] Washbrook, "Language," pp. 186-188.
[12] Javed Majeed, "'The Jargon of Indostan': An Exploration of Jargon in Urdu and East Company English," in Peter Burke and Roy Porter ed., *Languages and Jargons*, Cambridge, 1995, pp.182-205.
[13] Buranjis were mostly written in the eastern dialect of Assamiya, which from this time began to rank as the standard literary speech. This development was due to the predominance of eastern Assam as the seat of the Ahom court and administration, and centre of trade and commerce. It was after the pattern of this prose that the easy and simple prose of the Arunoday developed. Birinchi Kumar Barua, *History of Assamese Literature*, New Delhi, 1964, p.100.
[14] It should be noted that I use Assamiya to refer to the languages of the precolonial texts and Assamese for the standardised print vernacular that was consolidated in the nineteenth century.
[15] After the break up of the Koch kingdom and consequent diminution of patronage, by the eighteenth century, the centre of gravity of Assamiya literature shifted from Western to Eastern Assam, to the now Hinduised Ahom court. Apart from Vaishnavite texts, Assamiya translations of the Puranas and kavyas appeared, often with erotic themes. Also, there was the development of secular and utilitarian works – translations of *Pancantantra, Hitopadesa* and so on. Works on medicine, astrology, astronomy and dance were also commissioned, often as illuminated manuscripts. The court poets of Raja Harendranarayan of Cooch Behar wrote in 'Swadesi bhasha' and translated several books of the *Mahabharat*. The carit-puthi genre ('devotional hagiographies') also continued, both in prose and in verse. From Satyendra Nath Sarma, *Assamese Literature*, Wiesbaden, 1976, pp.61-7.

patronage was not the same as that in the caritputhis emerging from the satras.[16] But, this vernacularisation does not mean that court and monastery had broken decisively with the cosmopolitan languages that had previously circulated across wide swathes of Asia. Thus we see that the satras continued to contribute to the Sanskrit sacral tradition as well as to the Brajabuli literary culture associated with Vaishnavite devotionalism.[17]

It is important to remember that these extant texts represent only the 'grapholects' of the region, written idioms emerging from a few of Assamiya's speech variants, ranging all the way from the Nagamese used along the hilly periphery to the Barpetiya and Nalbariya of the Lower Assam plains. Most of these idioms had not acquired a literate form. As Walter Ong observes,

> Often where a cluster of dialects is found, one regional dialect has developed chirographically beyond all others, for economic, political, religious, or other reasons, and has eventually become a national language...While it is true that these were all at root regional and/or class dialects, their status as chirographically controlled national languages has made them different kinds of dialects or language from those which are not written on a large scale.[18]

Such a dichotomy between speech idioms that had acquired written form and the vast majority that had not done so would consolidate into a hierarchy of status for the people who used them, thanks to the language wisdom that colonial knowledge brought in its wake.

One example of a precolonial written variant that might have challenged the growing monopoly of ujani Assamiya was Kamrupi, the dominant idiom in Lower Assam, where Ahom authority had been constantly contested by both internal and external forces. Nonetheless, the association of court patronage with ujani Assamiya meant that the latter could develop a culture of civility that Kamrupi never managed. From

---

[16] Ananta Kandali, the sixteenth century translator of the *Ramayan* wrote, 'I can compose Sanskrit verses well, yet I prefer to write in Assamese verses so that women and Sudras can understand and take delight in the contents of my writings.' Quoted from Harinarayan Dutta Barua ed., *The Assamese Bhagavata*, Guwahati, 1959, p.1230, v.16210 in Sarma, *Assamese Literature*, p.6.

[17] The Brajabuli of Vidyapati's songs, which had been admired and imitated from the sixteenth century, led to the development of a curious poetic jargon, the artificial Brajabuli dialect. This points towards an interesting diffusion of devotional modes all over Eastern India in this period. From Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*, Vol. 1, London, 1926, p.109.

[18] Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, London, 1982, pp. 106-7.

the seventeenth century, a new cultural ingredient, the Indo-Persian, entered this territory as the Ahom encountered the Mughal. One lasting feature of this was that Kamrupi came to possess a much larger incidence of Hindustani and Persian words than the ujani Assamiya.[19] During the nineteenth century, Kamrupi was sporadically championed by some publicists whose origins in Lower Assam made it their 'mother-tongue' and the American Baptist missionaries briefly toyed with the idea of nurturing that 'dhekeri' idiom in their print productions.[20] But the greater part of the colonial intelligentsia continued to emerge from the caste Hindu and Ahom families of Upper Assam. Ultimately, ujani Assamiya's greater access to 'symbolic capital' meant that both the first printing press and a claim to be the official vernacular came from an Upper Assam location.[21] Aided by missionary and colonial interlocutors, this intelligentsia was the prime agent in ordering ujani Assamiya into a modern Assamese print language, and in relegating its Lower Assam companions to the status of rustic dialects.

A caveat is required here to qualify what might otherwise appear to be a portrayal of the smooth continuity between Assamiya to Assamese that a subsequent linguistic nationalism has tried hard to establish as 'common sense'. The actual picture which emerges from the linguistic practices of colonial Assam is much more convoluted. For instance, the early-nineteenth-century texts by Harakanta Barua Sadar Amin, Haliram Dhekial Phukan and Maniram Barbhandar Barua were marked by a mobility of vocabulary and language use completely different from the standardised print Assamese that the new intelligentsia would champion.[22] The eclectic mode of these

---

[19] At the same time, administrative and classificatory terms were appropriated from North Indian or Bengal usage, such as khel, to indicate a socio-political peasant unit, which was used not only within the Ahom territory, but also as far afield as the Naga hills. Despite the adoption of other elements of Mughal style, Persian never became an administrative idiom in the manner of other parts of the Indian sub-continent. Maniram Barbhandar Barua's list of court servants submitted to Justice Mills in 1853 indicates that Persian writers were present, as well as scribes for Assamiya and Sanskrit. But other colonial documents of this early period constantly bemoaned the expense and scarcity of Persian scribes in Assam.

[20] *Phrases, Asamese and Dhekeri*, Sibsagar, 1849.

[21] Haliram Dhekial Phukan noted that the people of Upper Assam dismissively used the term 'dhekeri' for the inhabitants of Lower Assam, to signify their slow, plodding manner of speech in their dialect. The word dhekeri itself came from a pargana within the medieval Koch kingdom. By the early twentieth century, there was some effort to redress this stereotype by periodicals such as the Bahi, which declared in an editorial that the two languages Assamese and Kamrupi were one and the same. Quoted by Rajen Saikia, *Social and Economic History of Assam*, Delhi, 2001, p.171.

[22] Harakanta Barua, *Sadar Aminor Atmajivani*, Guwahati 1930 and Maniram Barbhandar Barua attributed, "Buranji Vivekratna," DHAS.

early colonial productions did not also resemble precolonial systems of language use – neither the courtly nor the devotional texts produced in the later Ahom period. Perhaps this linguistic instability should simply be attributed to the fraught moment of their production, testimony to the delicate negotiation by scribal caste elites between the Burmese invaders, the Ahom monarchy and the East India Company.

The East India Company had begun to encounter these service groups during the last part of the eighteenth century as they fled from the onslaughts of the Moamoria rebels and the Burmese invaders in Assam into the adjacent districts of Bengal. A little known contribution to the Company's archives was made as a result of this encounter by the paradigmatic colonial seeker after knowledge - Francis Buchanan. This was a wordlist he compiled as an example 'of the dialects in use around Rungpore', comprising a blend of words and scripts from what we now know as the Bengali, Assamese, Persian and Urdu languages.[23] Such an eclectic juxtaposition provides a telling indication of the plurality of speeches in that transitional zone. From other texts produced by dubhashis located upon this Assam-Bengal border, at the cusp of the Ahom and British regimes, it is possible to find a similar tendency to switch between various 'high' registers. We can speculate as to this being a strategy attuned to that particular moment in time and space, but also as a telling indicator of the cultural and political modes employed by a South Asian service elite. In addition, given the circumstances wherein this elite was located, an element of social climbing cannot be discounted. Such a group may well have seen this as a strategic way to distinguish itself from the common herd. Maniram's "Buranji Vivekratna" which uses a lingual mode closer to the Bengali variants familiar to British traders and administrators perhaps originated from this complex agenda. Another instance of register shift dictated by the precise nature of text and use comes from Harakanta Barua Sadar Amin's Atmaiivani. In this memoir of his life and career, he employed a form of colloquial Assamese liberally interspersed with Hindustani and Persian words - an idiom apposite to his location in Lower Assam and his identity as a revenue official.[24] This contrasted with a work he produced at the behest of his British

[23] Francis Buchanan Hamilton Papers, OIOC Mss Eur. K 156-75.
[24] Harakanta Barua, *Sadar Aminor Atmajivani.*

superiors, an Assam Buranji, which faithfully followed the narrative and linguistic strategy of the precolonial manuscript it was transmuting into print.[25]

Significantly, colonial officials comprehended the complex linguistic repertoire of the dubhashis in quite a different manner. We find David Scott remarking that the Burmese invaders into Assam, with their mixed force of 'Asamese, Cacharees...and Burmahs' had despatched messengers to the British with 'a letter written in the Bengalee character, but in a dialect that no one in camp understands [Camp Budderpore, 1824]'.[26] In a similar mode, other British observers, ranging from Captain Welsh (in 1792) to Francis Buchanan (in 1809) and William Robinson (in the 1830s) concluded that the linguistic peculiarities they encountered upon the Northeastern frontier were explainable as inherent to 'barbarous variants' of Bengali. Virtually the same script as Bengali was used for writing ujani Assamiya and Kamrupi, and that was taken to mean that the latter were only dialects of the former, even if completely incomprehensible to a Bengali speaker.[27] In the pecking order of civilisation that British rule was constructing, different groups of people were being classified into hierarchical stages of caste and tribe. In a similar vein, their modes of speech were to be arranged along a ladder of language and dialect. The rest of this chapter will show how far colonialism's subjects in Assam would go towards challenging this, through their marshalling of arguments harkening back to another set of Enlightenment-inspired theories - of language, race, history and reason.

4 (2) Haliram: Writing in dubhashi mode

Recent studies by historians and anthropologists have given considerable attention to language as an important component in the colonial encounter. They have delineated how the new regimes in Asia and Africa, inspired by the Romantic movement and the philological 'science' to which it gave rise, were inclined to conceive of language as a

---

[25] S.K. Bhuyan ed., Harakanta Barua's *Assam Buranji or A History of Assam From the Commencement of Assam in 1826 AD, being an Enlarged Version of the Chronicle of Kasinath Tamuli Phukan*, Guwahati, 1930.
[26] H.H. Wilson, *Documents Relating to the Burmese War*, Calcutta, 1827.
[27] This should be placed in context of the impression the first generation of Company servants received that a single tongue called Hindustani was spoken all over India.

product of 'nature' and also as the fundamental defining parameter of a 'culture'.[28] Thus, colonial knowledge sought to examine languages to 'discover' the basic principles of construction which demarcated one from another and provided clues to the 'essential' cultural genius of each. Variations of 'dialect' and idiomatic usage were recognized, but by definition, each language was taken to possess a 'standard', root form.

In South Asia, while the colonial British initially conformed, in true successor style, to the use of Mughal administrative idioms, their growing imperial pretensions were accompanied by a momentous change in policy, towards using vernaculars contiguous with locality. As Cohn and Washbrook show, the science of philology now directed them to 'discover' the root forms and standard structures of the Indian vernaculars, considered as Nature's authentic artifacts in the field of human language. Along the way, they added an increasing number of dubhashis, pandits and munshis to the Company's payroll, through whose efforts were generated a huge literature of wordlists, grammars, dictionaries and primers. From the mid-nineteenth century, such interactions between colonial administrators, missionaries and scribal elites resulted in the steady creation of standardised print-ready forms of vernacular languages. These in turn were speedily re-appropriated by indigenous society. As literacy based upon them expanded, so did a vernacular press and publishing industry. What we can discern is a circular set of processes where language responded to the new 'civilising' and 'ordering' imperatives, whose realisation, in turn, depended very much upon its transformation.[29] New hierarchies were gradually displacing older ones as European linguistic forms and literary genres captured prestige, profit and power within the world of the vernacular.[30] For instance, in the Tamil region, Ramaswamy delineates how an economy of significations was developing which assigned the native a linguistic label and a racial category, decided whether he possessed a 'history', and determined whether his 'culture' was worthy of being classified as a 'civilization'.[31]

---

[28] See Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians*, Oxford, 1985; Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power*, Cambridge, 1986; Washbrook, "Language."
[29] Washbrook, "Language," pp.179-190.
[30] See Cohn, *An Anthropologist*; Ramaswamy, *Passions*; Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule*, Ithaca, 1988.
[31] See Ramaswamy, *Passions*, p.254. Also see Thomas R. Metcalf, *A New Cambridge History of India: Ideologies of the Raj*, Cambridge, 1995.

As David Scott and his successors expanded British authority into Assam, a similar language trajectory was being plotted for this new frontier. An Assamese intelligentsia would join its counterparts elsewhere in South Asia in asserting the longevity and uniqueness of its linguistic heritage, and as its inevitable accompaniment, in sacrificing lesser variants which could impede the monolingual status that a modern nation would require. However, that moment was yet to arrive. In the early-nineteenth-century, the dubhashi culture, in keeping with its nomenclature of 'dual language use', was permitting a very different set of linguistic practices. In Assam, the exemplar of this culture was Haliram Dhekial Phukan (1801-1832), who had made a successful journey from Ahom service into the British administration. In the absence of any personal testimonies, we have to rely on examining the two texts that he published from Calcutta in 1829 to construct a 'thick description' of his eclectic mode of print involvement. We can go on to examine the changed form that such an involvement took for his son, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-59) and his nephew Gunabhiram Barua (1834-94). By examining the different circumstances surrounding the texts that they produced, a marked attitudinal shift towards language and identity can be discerned, from one generation to another. The rest of the chapter gives a brief glimpse into the career of other 'cultural entrepreneurs' such as Lakshminath Bezbarua (1864-1938). Such a strategy of examining individual lives and actions allows for a more-rounded analysis of the 'ideologies of language' in colonial Assam, i.e. 'those networks of representations and significations about language which emerge within particular literary, social, political and religious formations'.[32]

For Haliram and his peers among the service gentry of the Ahom state, the upheavals of the early nineteenth century brought them into the role of dubhashis in the employ of the East India Company. The Burmese invasion of the Ahom heartland in Upper Assam caused the king and his officials to flee, initially to Lower Assam, then even further afield, into North Bengal. Prominent among them were Haliram and his brother Jagyaram. Their father, Parusuram Barua, had himself been the adopted son of

[32] Ramaswamy, *Passions*, p.10.

a Brahmin who migrated to Assam in the reign of Gaurinath Singha and obtained the profitable office of Duwariya Barua, in charge of the customs post at Hadira Chowki, on the Bengal border.[33] After Haliram succeeded his father to the post, the Burmese troubles forced him and his brother to seek shelter in the adjacent Company ruled territories. Once established at a new base in Goalpara, they resumed their trading activities, which involved dealings with the doyen of Bengal's mercantile life, the Jagat Seth. During this period, Haliram married the daughter of a Gosain from Majuli, also a refugee there.[34] This stint in Bengal was what brought the two brothers into direct contact with the East India Company, which was preparing to deploy its forces against the Burmese. The sonorous titles that the Ahom king had bestowed upon Haliram and Jagyaram, of Dhekial Phukan and Khargariya Phukan respectively, were now confirmed by David Scott, who also gave Haliram the new responsibility of Revenue Seristadar.

After the annexation, Haliram went on to further promotion, in 1832, at the recommendation of Scott's successor, Captain Jenkins.

> I have nominated Holee Ram Dhekial Phokun, a native of Assam of noble family as an Assistant Magistrate at Gowhatty...The individual in question stood high in the confidence of Mr. Scott, and is a man of large property and extended information and professes some literary celebrity, he has visited Bengal and Hindustan and has paid particular attention to the European system of jurisprudence and forms of government regarding which he entertains liberal opinions. He also professes some knowledge of our arts and sciences.[35]

This 'literary celebrity' alluded to Haliram's involvement in the Bengali print milieu of Calcutta. This came in the form of two texts, Kamakhya-yatra-paddhati and Assam Desher Itihas or Assam Buranji, published in 1829 at Haliram's own expense from the Samachar Chandrika Press. A striking instance of dubhashi linguistic code switching,

---

[33] The Duwariya Barua effectively held a 'farm' of the returns, with an annual rent of 10 per cent or so due to the Ahom state. The Bengal merchants constantly chafed under the high rate and the arbitrary nature of the exactions imposed upon them at the Hadira Chowky, and this was not redressed until 1835 when all the chowkies at Goalpara were abolished, thereby removing the last Ahom restriction upon external trade. It was the wealth and connections from this position that earned Haliram and Anandaram the epithets of 'Rajas of Assam' from the Calcutta bhadralok with whom they came into contact.

[34] Gunabhiram Barua, *Anandaram Dhekial Phukanar Jivan Charitra* ('An Account of the Life of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan'), Calcutta, 1880, pp.13-15.

[35] Foreign Political Consultation No. 81, 19 March, 1832; Letter to G. Swinton, Chief Secretary to Govt, Fort William, NAI.

and the strategy behind it, can be discerned from Haliram's deployment of the Sanskrit and Bengali languages in these texts.[36] This gives a trace of the shifting contours of language during Assam's transition into colonial rule, as part of the Bengal Presidency.

In the Kamakhya-yatra-paddhati, as befitted its sacred subject matter, the Kamakhya shrine of Lower Assam, the language used was Sanskrit. This deployment clearly signified Haliram's desire to assert the shrine's claim to ritual prominence within an Indic sacred landscape. Equally significant was his choice to emphasize a Sakta sacred topography for Assam rather than a Vaishnavite one, for it was the former that had developed close links with Bengal. The cult of the mother goddess Kamakhya, annexed as a representation of Lord Shiva's consort, had allowed for the legitimation of 'Sanskritising' local lineages by representatives of Bengal Brahminical ritual who claimed affiliation to Nadia.[37] While the Indic hinterland had loomed large in Assamese Vaishnavite through its tradition of Krishna devotion, this was negotiated largely through the sect's literary appropriations of the sacred landscape of Braj. On the other hand, the Sakta cult had involved direct intervention by the Assam dynasties - the Koch and the Ahom kings imported Brahmins from Bengal to officiate as priests at the Kamakhya shrine, and as their personal gurus. As a colonial administrator described, 'in the time of the former Government, no person was allowed to make any offering at the above temple at the Durga Puja, except the representatives of the Raja and the superintendent of the temple'.[38] In this manner, these ruling groups had managed to partially insert themselves into larger Sanskritic traditions of ritual behaviour while maintaining links with a popular localised tradition through selective patronage of the Vaishnavites.[39] Haliram's family guru belonged to the same Parbatiya Gosain family of priests that presided over that shrine and it was as Kamakhya's interlocutor that he appeared before a Bengal audience.[40] While the precise impact of this text cannot be estimated, it seems to have arrived at a

---

[36] Haliram was said to have been well versed in all three languages. Gunabhiram Barua, *Jivan Charitra*, pp.18-19.
[37] The members of this priestly line came to be known as the Parbatiya Gosains, from the parbat ('hill') on which the Kamakhya temple was located.
[38] Foreign Secret Consultations, Nos. 44-5, 17 August 1827; David Scott to Fort William, NAI.
[39] A fuller discussion of this was covered in Chapter 2 of the dissertation.
[40] His son Anandaram received initiation from Kalidas Bhattacharya of the Parbatiya Gosain family.

significant point in the nineteenth century, when previously marginal shrines such as Kalighat were already asserting a status outside localised networks. In a similar manner, within a few decades of the colonial annexation of Assam, Kamakhya began to figure on the all India itinerary of tirtha yatra ('pilgrimage'), acquiring fame as the farthest point to the east within an Indic sacred geography.[41]

A striking contrast was provided by Haliram's other text, Assam Desher Itihas or Assam Buranji. The preface itself asserted its agenda to be very different from that of the sacred in the Yatra-paddhati, by inserting itself into the 'useful knowledge' circulating within the colonial urban space.

> A huge amount of vidya ('learning') has emerged out of the printing presses in the city of Calcutta through the efforts of many talented gentlemen who have come out with many kinds of books, including ones describing different lands but, there is as yet none about Assam. There is a land which is variously called Assam and Kamrup, but let alone discussion about it, there is not even much idea among the people of other lands as to what it is like or where it is. Therefore, there is an urgent need to provide information about Assam.[42]

Haliram further emphasised the importance of his endeavour by drawing attention to the increased porousness between the region and the larger Indian hinterland. 'After the British takeover, people from many lands have started interacting and coming there, but they have no way of learning about it, so for the benefit of all, I have published this book called Assam Buranji or Assam Desher Bornona.'[43]

Haliram's situating his work as a buranji was justified in terms of its content, which closely followed the model of the precolonial texts. But this was overlaid, as the preface showed, with a new self-consciousness about its involvement with the colonial rulers, the Bengali and British readers and the city it was addressing. This became apparent in its most striking discontinuity from the traditional chronicle - its language. Rather than ujani Assamiya, the text deployed Bengali to describe the land of Assam, for the delectation of the 'learned readers' of Calcutta. Evidently,

---

[41] By the end of the nineteenth century, the role of patron to the Kamakhya temple was performed by important all-India figures such as Rameshwar Singh, the Maharaja of Darbhanga, who is recorded as having visited it in 1901.
[42] Haliram Dhekial Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, Calcutta, 1829 (reprint Guwahati, 1962), Preface.
[43] Ibid.

Haliram's act of writing this Buranji in Bengali was as strategic a choice as had been his use of Sanskrit in the Yatra-paddhati. As the reference to the printing presses of Calcutta indicates, under the East India Company's rule, Bengali was the most apposite language for a buranji, in its mission to spread knowledge. Such a public appearance, for a buranji, was in itself unprecedented. The precolonial buranjis had been produced on commission from the Ahom ruling class and circulated among its leading families.[44] There were only a few manuscripts of each work, each slightly different from the other, with all the idiosyncrasies inherent to a scribe-inscribed text. But Haliram's text, fixed as it was by the technology of print, could now be distributed in bulk among Bengali literati and British officials. With a much broader remit than previous chronicles produced under the aegis of a local regime, the Assam Buranji sought a place within the new genre of useful knowledge. Standing as it did, at the crossroads of indigenous and colonial concerns, this text came at a key moment in the transition to a new order.[45] Nonetheless, the doubled title would seem to suggest a certain amount of authorial ambivalence, whether his text was merely to be a description on behalf of the outside world or whether it should follow the time tested model of the buranji. But the die was cast, in any case, from the moment of its use of language. Previous buranjis had remained squarely rooted in a local context by virtue of their Tai or the Assamiya idiom. But the chaste Bengali of this neo-buranji inaugurated the possibility of broadcasting the information about Assam to a new print public, located both in and outside the region.

It can be argued that the usage of Assamiya variants in late Ahom manuscripts, by court and satra elites, had represented an entirely different linguistic agenda from Haliram's. It had involved aristocratic groups shifting from the sacral idioms of Tai and Sanskrit towards local speech idioms, which were now acquiring written forms.

---

[44] However, there are signs that the Ahom ruling class was accommodating itself to the new situation. The last text in the precolonial framework was commissioned after Haliram's work had appeared, when Purandar Singha (reigned 1833-38) ordered Kasinath Tamuli Phukan to compile an Assam Buranji, in the usual mode of collating older manuscripts, both in Assamiya and Ahom. This work, in the ujani Assamiya idiom of the Ahom court, reached the American missionaries, who printed it in 1844, with revisions by another Sibsagar dangariya Radhanath Barbarua. In addition, the Orunodoi also printed extracts from a number of old chronicles. All these manuscripts were finally acquired by the local historian S. K. Bhuyan on behalf of the newly established Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS) in the 1930s. Most of them finally achieved print status at that point, with considerable editorial license taken by Bhuyan in the interest of creating a 'complete' history.

[45] Another work, also in Bengali, was *Krishi Darpan*, a treatise on agriculture in Assam, written in 1853 by Kefayatullah Sadar Munsif at the instance of Captain Rowlatt, the Collector of Kamrup.

This move was part of a wider phenomenon, characterised by Sheldon Pollock as the 'vernacularisation' that occurred in most parts of medieval South Asia.[46] In contrast, Haliram's shift towards the 'high' register of Bengali, a more cosmopolitan option than the local, was in the context of the momentous transition by an outlying periphery into an Indic hinterland. This can be more precisely understood by referring to two other texts, this time in manuscript form. While neither can be precisely dated, they were produced at the same cusp of change between orders.[47] They display a similar, though not identical juxtaposition of Bengali, Assamiya and Sanskrit terms, with an admixture of Persian and Hindustani vocabulary. Haliram's linguistic experimentation no longer seems an aberration. Rather, a consideration of these varied language strategies leads us to a notion of service elites who could flexibly deploy a fluid repertoire of linguistic codes, with no necessary connection, as yet, with ethnicity or community. In this particular context, the print and manuscript dichotomy does not possess much significance. The authors of the manuscripts "Sahibor Gun Bornona" and "Buranji Vivekratna" were unsuccessful aspirants to that world of print information into which Haliram's superior material circumstances and interlocutory skills permitted ready access. In the 1830s, Haliram and Jagyaram had already become well-known in the Bengali periodical world, which hailed the Assam Buranji as a welcome addition to the ranks of its information prose.[48]

4 (3) Brown, Bronson and Anandaram: Print Pioneers for Assamese

This section explores how Haliram's son, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan achieved a leading role in the growing convergence of land, language and literature for the 'imaginings' of an Assamese identity. It was its externality from this context, more than anything else, which ensured that Haliram's text would have a fairly brief life as far as the new Assamese public sphere was concerned. The printed character and the language of the text had rendered it as external to the dangariya's world as its contents made it unnecessary. While Calcutta intellectuals like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

---

[46] See Pollock, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular", pp.6-37.

[47] The Asiatic Society, Calcutta has classified one, which is in fragmentary handwritten folios, as an Assamese text of unknown provenance dating from the nineteenth century, called "Sahibor Gun Bornona, "('A Description of the Virtues of the Sahibs'). The other text is available only in part, as a transcript at the DHAS, attributed to Maniram Barbhandar Barua and is thought to be the second volume of the "Buranji Vivekratna," supposedly written in 1838.

[48] For some contemporary reviews of Haliram's work in the Samachar Darpan of 1830-1, see Brojendranath Bandhopadhyay ed., *Sambadpatre Sekaler Kotha, 1840-50*, Vol. 2, Calcutta.

treasured their copies of this text, the emerging Assamese vernacular world would relegate it to relative obscurity.[49]

This wider readership in the metropolis was desired by Haliram's son and nephew, but with limited success. In contrast to Haliram, they would then look inwards, to find an audience within the homeland. In 1829, when Haliram's works were published at Calcutta, the Assamiya idiom of the precolonial buranji had not yet come into print. The first printed texts in Assam emerged in the 1840s, from the American Baptist Press, followed by a few indigenous initiatives over the next few decades.[50] It was only from the 1870s that a more substantial oeuvre of Assamese print productions could emerge - through the aegis of a Calcutta based intelligentsia. Significantly enough, by that time, the authority of any Assam Buranji depended upon its location within the modern language of Assamese. Once the new print vernacular had begun to standardise a genealogy of language-as-literature for an Assamese 'nation', the hybrid linguistic affiliation of the dubhashi texts placed them outside the latter's boundaries.

A crucial role in Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's transition from his father's world, from an eclectic linguistic repertoire to a single minded vernacular affiliation, was played by the first Assamese periodical, the Orunodoi and its sponsors, the American Baptist missionaries. Assam was the second major field that this mission had taken up, after their work among the Karen people of Upper Burma. Through a spectacular misunderstanding over language, they expected their command over Shan to allow the conquest of this new territory, and eventually, expansion into China and Central Asia. Soon, the impossibility of this was apparent as a monolingual Shan-speaking field proved to be a chimera. Instead, the Baptists were faced with the necessity of learning a large variety of dialects and transposing them from oral into written forms before any scriptural dissemination was possible. By 1841, a shift in policy, and geographical scope was decided upon. The Assamiya language appeared to be a better prospect than the many preliterate tongues in the Sadiya area that they had so far

---

[49] A copy of the first edition of Haliram's *Assam Buranji* was found in the collection of books belonging to the Bengali savant Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's library.

[50] There is some mention of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan having established a press by the name of Calcutta New Press, but this is apocryphal evidence. None of its products have been found.

struggled to reduce to writing.[51] 'The Assamese are a most encouraging and inviting field; they are in great measure a civilised people...[though] each of the tribes has a language of its own...the Assamese is the common medium [of trade]'.[52]

However, the choice of this vernacular set the American Baptist mission on a course opposed to the colonial state. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, British rule had decided upon the replacement of Persian by local vernaculars wherever feasible. Act 29 of 1837 allowed the East India Company to put into place a system that would replace 'the use of the Persian language in any judicial proceeding or in any proceeding relating to the Revenue', by the 'vernacular' of each administrative unit. The rationale for this was that local people would be better served if the official machinery was accessible to them in their own tongues rather than the administrative language of the Mughal service elites. However, the difficulty here was the requirement to pin down a local vernacular suitable for administrative idiom. As Christopher King shows in the case of North India, this led to the initial phase of the controversy that would pose Hindi and Urdu against each other, and occlude smaller variants into the bounds of these new administrative idioms.[53]

In Assam, which had never been under the Mughal sway, the use of Persian had been very minimal. In the first years of British rule, the courts had permitted the dominant registers of Assamiya and Bengali to mediate the array of speeches in use among the population, as the Ahom regime must have done. By 1837, the government of the Bengal Presidency had arrived at the decision that administrative convenience would be best served through the monopoly of a standard vernacular, to be used alongside the English language.[54] Proceedings in Assam's courts and education in government schools were henceforward to be conducted in Bengali. The dominant view on this

---

[51] The first few years of the Mission had Nathan Brown and Miles Bronson learning the Khamti, the Ahom and assorted 'Naga dialects, each one confined to a few hundred speakers and apparently changing form every few miles. See Rev. Nathan Brown, "Alphabets of the Tai language," No. 61, January 1837, Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, pp.17-21 and the same author's "Comparison of Indo-Chinese Languages," in Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, No.63, December 1837, p.1023-37. Also a response to Brown's description of his Romanised script from the Rev. W. Morton, "Remarks on A 'Comparison of Indo-Chinese Languages'," in Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, No. 73, January 1838, pp.56-64.

[52] Journal of Nathan Brown, 1841, Barpujari, ed., *The American Missionaries*, p.77.

[53] See Christopher R. King, *One Language, Two Scripts*, Delhi, 1994.

[54] Ibid.

came from the Inspector of Schools, the former Serampore missionary William Robinson, who felt that 'the languages spoken in Asam' were 'essentially the same as the Bengali'. While acknowledging that there were 'a few discrepancies' he saw those as being essentially in the grammar, not in the vocabulary. At the same time, he took pains to point out that the Bengali too, in its native state, was 'extremely clumsy and uncouth'. 'It needed a literature to render it compact, energetic and harmonious', and it was that refined vernacular that he was advocating for official use in Assam, rather than the 'slovenly' and 'crude' tongues spoken by its people.[55]

Robinson's first opponents on this were the American Baptist missionaries. While acknowledging that 'Bengali and Assamese derived from Sanskrit...[and] bore close affinity to each other',[56] they contested his assumption that the local language was a 'vulgar' unwritten variant of the Bengali on two grounds. Firstly, they declared it to be a language that was 'centuries old'. Secondly, they asserted that their interactions with the local people had made it clear that Bengali was totally incomprehensible to them. Therefore, the government policy was ill-judged in terms of both accuracy and utility.[57] This staunch defence of the Assamese language was mounted in the 1850s, after the Americans had been operating their mission and its press from Sibsagar, the former Ahom capital, for almost a decade. Just as Robinson could claim the products of Serampore as samples of the refined literature that Bengali possessed, so could they flourish the products of their own press, from the Orunodoi periodical to the printed version of Kasinath Tamuli Phukan's Assam Buranji.[58]

Nonetheless, this avowal of Assamese had come only after a considerable degree of soul searching. A few years previously, the missionaries had been sympathetic to the variety of local tongues they encountered, but ambivalent about the direction of use, after their first attempt, to use the Shan idiom, proved unworkable. This had been done in the period of their first Mission at Sadiya - between 1836 and 1843. Nathan Brown had used the opportunity to further his researches into 'Indo-Chinese' languages, discovering that 'Siamese, Laos, Shyan, Khamti and Ahom are all merely

---

[55] William Robinson's memorandum cited in Barpujari, ed., *The American Missionaries*, pp.130-1.
[56] Rev. Nathan Brown, "Comparison of Indo-Chinese Languages," p.1024.
[57] Barpujari, ed., *The American Missionaries*, pp.128-9.
[58] Kasinath Tamuli Phukan, *Assam Buranji-sar*, Sibsagar, 1844.

dialects of the same original language which is called Tai, and prevails through a wide swathe of territory, extending from Siam to the valley of the Brahmaputra'.[59] Initially, they had planned on following William Jones' method of Romanising the script of such vernaculars, with the hope that the Roman script would act as a bridge between the 'Asamese, Khamti, Abor and Singho, so that a scholar who has learned to read one, can read the whole'.[60] By 1841, when they decided to concentrate upon the ujani Assamiya, they adopted the local script, rather than using the Roman, influenced perhaps by the criticisms of Jones' method as inadequate in conveying the full range of vernacular orthography and phonetics.[61] Since this script used for ujani Assamiya differed from the Bengali only in two characters, the mission's efforts at devising a separate typeface for it are indicative of a determination to emphasise the uniqueness of the new print Assamese. The region's distinct script, language and history were the basis for the new print culture that the missionaries were seeking to establish, in tandem with the indigenous elites of Upper Assam.

By interacting in Assamese, the American Baptists were quite alive to the advantages they hoped to find from the vacuum left by the state.

> I believe that so long as the courts and schools are in Bengali, there will be the greatest impediment to the education and improvement of the people. If missionaries should adopt Bengali, as the means of communicating religious truth, everyone would doubt them...[therefore] we have by every means in our power endeavored to make ourselves acquainted with the people, and by daily familiar intercourse acquire their language, so as to be able to communicate to them in the most direct manner the blessings of science and Christianity.[62]

Until Assam was constituted as a separate province with Assamese as the language of official use in 1873, the products of the Baptist printing press retained prominence as almost the only examples of a new literature of print in the region's vernacular. Their virtual monopoly over the new technology meant that a discourse on modernisation and identity among the region's new intelligentsia, men such as Anandaram Dkekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua, would emerge within the pages of its first discussion forum, the Orunodoi.

---

[59] Brown, "Comparison of Indo-Chinese Languages."
[60] Barpujari, ed., *The American Missionaries*, p.122.
[61] Rev. W. Morton, "Remarks on A 'Comparison of Indo-Chinese Languages'."
[62] "Letter from Bronson to Halliday, Lt. Governor of Bengal", in Barpujari, ed., *The American Missionaries,* pp.135-141.

The first member of the gentry to enter into a meaningful cultural dialogue with the colonial state and the missionaries over issues such as language was Anandaram, the only son of Haliram Dhekial Phukan. His assimilation into the new institutions and ideas had been fairly spasmodic. In the manner of any Brahmin child, he had been given a formal vidyarambha ('initiation into Sanskrit learning') at the age of five, but three years later, was admitted to the new English school in Gauhati that Robinson headed.[63] A pivotal change from the experiences of previous generations occurred in 1841 when he was sent to Calcutta to join the junior department of the Hindu College.[64] After family problems forced him to return halfway through his education, Captain Matthie, Deputy Commissioner at Gauhati, arranged for him to study English under a missionary, a Mr Bland. Anandaram soon was 'memorising a few pages of Johnson's Dictionary everyday, giving his wife lessons in reading and writing and learning Persian and Urdu from a Munshi'.[65]

From this wide linguistic repertoire, Anandaram selected Bengali for his first work, a selection of legal judgements from Bengal courts, such as the Sadar Adalater Nispatti, ('A Digest of Law Cases from the Sadar Adalat').[66] The language choice was understandable, since translating the English judgements into Bengali enabled him to bid for a wide-ranging readership. Considering the miniscule reading public in Assam, it was only sensible to produce these works for an audience in the Bengal Presidency at large, just as his father had done. Despite the establishment of a press at Sibsagar, the print potential of Assamese was still very restricted, evident in that Anandaram's only substantial work in it, the primer Assamiya Lorar Mitra ('A Friend of Young Assam'), intended as 'a complete course of elementary education for Assamese youth' could only be published in its first two parts in his lifetime. These were published anonymously in 1840, financed 'by subscriptions raised from

---

[63] Gunabhiram, *Jivan Charitra*, p.25.
[64] See Chapter 3 of the dissertation.
[65] Gunabhiram, *Jivan Charitra*, p.44.
[66] Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, *Phukan Dewan Quaidabandi*, Calcutta, 1849; *Sadar Dewani Nishpatti*, Calcutta 1850; *Ain O Byabastha Sangraha*, Calcutta, 1855.

European officers and the Native community'.[67] This list of subscribers represented a wide spectrum of local opinion, from the Ahom prince Kanderpeswar Singha to members of the service gentry such as Rudram Bordoloi and Munshi Kufuyutullah and officials such as Major Jenkins.

It was Anandaram's two subsequent works, addressing the colonial state through the medium of the English language, which would enshrine him within an Assamese nationalist pantheon. The first was the lengthy memorial he sent to the committee headed by Justice Mills enquiring into the condition of Assam after twenty years of British rule.[68] Despite the brevity of Anandaram's encounter with a formal system of colonial education, he seems to have considered it to be a defining factor in his own personal development. Its inadequacies in Assam formed the basis for his critique of colonial policy in the region. While Assam continued to be stigmatised as a region with 'near universal ignorance and illiteracy',[69] colonial policy in the sphere of education was itself so far lacking that it could not measure up even to the standard of its far less 'enlightened' Ahom predecessor. Anandaram claimed that this lacuna in education was connected to colonial policy on language. The new regime had made a serious error, when it replaced the earlier Sanskrit-based education by a system that used a vernacular, not the local Assamese, but the Bengali. What Anandaram was directing Mills' attention to was the introduction of a colonial educational system whose benefits were outweighed by teachers, textbooks and a language of instruction that were completely at odds with its popular focus.

> Little argument is necessary to prove that popular education will never advance in the country unless the system at present pursued in the Vernacular schools be remodeled...It is not through the medium of a language refined and elevated in imitation of the Sanskrit, above the comprehension of the mass of the population, that we should try to educate the people, or strive to give them a popular literature; but it is by means of the language spoken and understood by all classes that popular education can be successfully carried on. [70]

---

[67] Maheswar Neog ed., *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language and on Vernacular Education in Assam*, Calcutta, 1855 (reprint Guwahati, 1959). A few extracts from *Assamiya Lorar Mitra* were published in the Orunodoi in 1849-52.

[68] See Chapter 2 of the dissertation for some other aspects of this document.

[69] John Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam during a Residence of Fourteen Years*, London, 1855; A.J. Moffat Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1854 (reprint Guwahati, 1982).

[70] Mills, *Report*, Appendix J, Observations on the Administration of the Province of Assam by Baboo Anundaram Dakeal Phukan, p.94.

Rather than go into the merits or demerits of the educational institutions, Anandaram sought to locate the blame for its inadequacies upon language. In this text, it was not literary merit which was the chief end in view, but its utility for popular education. He saw popular education as a novel system, as distinguished from the Sanskrit-based learning which was, by its very character, comprehensible only to the small elite which would access it. For the purposes of this system, he awarded Assamese a higher place than either Sanskrit or Bengali. As far as popular education was concerned, it was precisely the 'high virtues' of Sanskrit that made it unsuitable. Again, it was the Bengali language's attempt to imitate those virtues that rendered it unacceptable for that purpose. This can also be read as an implicit acknowledgement that while Bengali was accessible to Anandaram's own class, it was not so for the common people.

Conversely, it was the very lack of refinement of the Assamese, the fact that it was spoken and understood by all in Assam which made it suitable for the popular education that the British had introduced. While education was essential to redress the backwardness that afflicted Assam's population, it could never be successful or truly popular while it floundered on this critical issue of language. It was the 'instruction...in [vernacular] schools...in a foreign language, viz., the Bengalee which is imperfectly understood by the teachers themselves, not to speak of the pupils' which was so hindering the progress made by the local people that 'very few ex-students have qualified themselves to fill offices of trust or responsibility'.[71] While Anandaram did not seek to outline a language conspiracy, as did a later generation of the Assamese intelligentsia, his words definitely contained a tinge of accusation to the effect that 'they have been led to believe that Assamese and Bengali are one and the same language'.[72]

In 1855, Anandaram published another English work, A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language and on Vernacular Education in Assam, in which he sought to

---

[71] Neog, *A Few Remarks.*
[72] Ibid.

make a case for the Assamese language as a modern vehicle for progress.[73] This was published in pamphlet form at his own expense, a text which graphically outlined the grammatical, etymological and vocabulary differences between Assamese and Bengali. The appearance of this text needs to be located in the context of the antagonism to Assamese-as-language expressed to Mills by colonial interlocutors such as Captain Jenkins and William Robinson. Their dismissal of Assamese for educational and official use rested upon it being a mere dialect of Bengali.[74] In response came these Remarks by Anandaram, comparing the literary history of Assam with that of Bengal, citing William Carey to show how Bengali itself once had been thought of as a dialect. Unlike his previous effort, this text took pains to emphasise its scientific positioning, with a 'copious vocabulary, a literary genealogy and historical origin'.[75] This, again, were the decisive elements which were supposed to determine the language selected for vernacular education in Assam.

Since the lineages of both Assamese and Bengali were from Sanskrit therefore 'the Bengali is not a particle more copious than the Assamese'.[76] Sanskrit and Bengali, which had previously both been termed as 'refined' languages, were now inserted into a hierarchy with the former at the apex. With that given as incontestable fact, it only remained to plot the place of Assamese in this hierarchy. Anandaram's defence of the separate lineage and status of Assamese as language, for him 'a fact so obvious and to our judgement so irrefutable' proceeded to use philological principles to buttress this analysis. Interestingly, despite this recourse to an Enlightenment derived principle of reasoned judgement, Anandaram's analysis, relying upon lexical rather than syntactic or phonetic comparisons, was much more in the spirit of pre-Enlightenment linguistic theory. He took up a passage from a book called Kavita Ratnakar, put it in parallel columns in Bengali and Assamese versions, and showed that of 287 words in the Assamese, 112 were in no way connected with Bengali, that 98 had been derived from

---

[73] Neog, *A Few Remarks*.
[74] William Robinson in Mills' *Report*. It was to counter this that Dhekial Phukan published his *Few Remarks*. He was backed up by Miles Bronson in his letter to the editor of the Friend of India, extracts from which were reprinted in the Baptist Missionary Magazine of 1855. Bronson's name also headed the memorial sent to George Campbell on 9 April 1872 signed by over two hundred residents of Assam. Exactly a year later, Campbell decided to instate Assamese in the schools and courts of the Brahmaputra valley.
[75] Neog, *A Few Remarks*.
[76] Ibid.

Sanskrit and that only 77 words were either derived from or had a resemblance with words in Bengali.[77] After this pioneering effort at comparative analysis, he proceeded to dissect everyday usage. He gave specimens of the colloquial language of Bengal and Assam with the aid of a passage from the Masik Patrika and through translating it into the local idiom, asserted its distinct character.[78]

What the production of this second text reveals is that utility, Anandaram's first argument, was not sufficient by itself in order to achieve language status. What was required was an application of the Enlightenment categories of reason and history to Assamese. Its legitimacy as language, as opposed to dialect, could be only be traced through historicising its past. Therefore, his earlier statement that Bengali was a 'refined' and 'elevated' language that Assamese bore no comparison with, had now to be refuted. This was done by tracing a historical lineage which would claim a higher position for Assamese in relation to Bengali. Now Anandaram claimed that since Assamese also descended from Sanskrit, it possessed at least as much legitimacy, while its long tradition of prose, as exemplified in the buranji tradition, was proof of it being a more modern and rational language. This is the moment where we can locate how the co-existence of Bengali and Assamese within the same individual's cultural repertoire was becoming incompatible, in a public arena of language contestation. Anandaram's initial advocacy of Assamese had been premised upon the workmanlike criteria of its status as a colloquial language-of-use among the common people, who would benefit from the colonial system of popular education only if it was available in its medium. However, the logic of colonial linguistic and administrative rationale had brought about a shift in his rhetoric, which was now directed towards historicising language and devising a literature for it. This was the pattern that subsequent publicists would follow, as they established a community structured around a standardised language, contoured along the faultlines of gender, caste and class.

---

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid. The Masik Patrika was a literary magazine in Bengali started by Pearychand Mitra and Radhanath Sikdar at Calcutta in 1854. It claimed to write in the language in which people ordinarily conversed.

(4) Love and Mother-tongue

It is necessary to keep in mind that this vernacular agenda was being negotiated by a newly emerging intelligentsia in the light of colonial assignation of hierarchy to language and people. Very often, arguments about utility or history or literary merit seemed, even to their authors, weak in comparison to the strength of the territory that English ruled over. This perhaps explains why the vocabulary of progress came to be buttressed by that of feeling. For Assamese, the first texts addressing the state on this subject came from Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and the American missionaries Brown, Bronson and Danforth. We see them fashioning their defence of Assamese in the English language, using a vocabulary that emphasised the themes of utility and legitimacy. As their efforts bore fruit, the vernacular was gradually becoming the defining characteristic of the new public spheres. Concomitantly, an economy of 'affect' was being constructed in, and for Assamese.

One of its early examples was a series of letters anonymously published in the Orunodoi in 1853, purporting to be advice from an Assamese in Calcutta to his countrymen.[79] The first thing that emerges from these letters is the strong rendering of intimacy they foster. While the epistolary mode was quite common for such didactic writings, in these particular circumstances, its affective connotations were strengthened by the message it contained. Thereby, an additional familiarity was asserted with the reader. Despite the author's anonymity, it was extremely likely that he was known to most of his readers, given the small and close character of the Assamese reading public. In any case, the identity he adopted as 'A Countryman based in Calcutta' was sufficient to declare his community with the 'Young Assam' that the Orunodoi was addressing. These letters provided exactly the kind of 'truthful and elevated' sentiments the periodical hoped to foster in its indigenous audience, and the first one was prefixed by an encouraging note from the editor, William Ward, encouraging more of its readers to produce such writings.[80]

---

[79] "Letter from Calcutta," Orunodoi, May 1853; "Second Letter from Calcutta," Orunodoi, July 1853; "Learning Assamese - A Friendly Word," August 1853 and "Fourth Letter from Calcutta," Orunodoi, October 1853, Baptist Mission Press, Sibsagar. Contemporary local scholarship identifies them as having been written by Gunabhiram Barua, while still a student at Calcutta. Tilottama Misra, *Literature and Society in Assam*, Delhi, 1987.

[80] "Letter from Calcutta," Orunodoi, May 1853.

The first letter, published in the May 1853 issue, was juxtaposed with a singularly apposite instance of the 'general knowledge' that was the Orunodoi's specialty, a piece describing The Times newspaper. This was placed next to another informative essay, entitled "Joy of an uncivilised people, the Bechuanas on learning to read".[81] Primed by these examples of the benefits of learning, the Assamese reader could readily respond to a fervent appeal to expand his own affections towards a similar venture in his mother-tongue. The epistles, with their reiteration of 'dear friends', enabled such a fictive network to bind writer and putative reader together, thereby drawing the outlines of a language community along horizontal lines. This familiar relationship received further emphasis with the author's distress at the lack of affection ('on-ador') that their countrymen were displaying towards learning ('vidya').[82] What was being imaginatively evoked was an affective bond between friends, language and learning, all brought together under the umbrella of Assamese.

For the writer as he identified himself, a Calcutta student, the Assamese he was championing emerged, in the first instance, through its links with other languages.

> In a country such as Bharatvarsha, there are so many languages and the root of them all is Sanskrit. Therefore it would not be wrong if those matters were rendered in our language, rather it would be wrong if they were not. O beloved inhabitants of our country, if you are to benefit it through your education, use the Sanskrit language as a support to begin composing books, with one person helping another to spread the language of the country.[83]

What he was advocating was an organic process, whereby a relationship with the original source Sanskrit should inevitably transform the reader's situation vis-a-vis Assamese. 'Just as we would borrow or buy a plough if there was none in our home, just as we transplant trees and flowers from where they grow abundantly to our homes to create our own flower gardens, just as we bring water from the river to fill up our ponds'.[84]

---

[81] "Joy of an Uncivilised People, the Bechuanas on Learning to Read," Orunodoi, May 1853.
[82] "Letter from Calcutta," Orunodoi, May 1853.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.

Such metaphors of place alert us to the fact that for this emerging public, the territory of homeland was coming to be increasingly important, at a time when it was physically being opened up for settlement by groups external to the community of the mother-tongue. We see the author actively seeking out a community of friends, united in a common love. 'In the country where we are born or where we live, and whose speech we cannot forget from the day of our birth until death, that language is what is called mother-tongue.'[85] This of course, elided the fact that the author himself, by his self-description, was not living in that land. By stressing the unalienable bond with matri bhasha or swadeshi bhasha, the text was seeking to sublimate its didactic message within the emotional quest those terms conveyed.[86] Ultimately, by virtue of a community of friends allying themselves into a common 'adoration' of learning, language and land, they would achieve the all important unnati, the watchword of the age.

The problem, of course, was that the reader had to be convinced that affiliation to mother-tongue was to be privileged over any other, something that was clearly not yet the case for most Assamese elites. Thus, a dual appeal was mounted, both on the grounds of utility as well as sentiment. It would be 'advisable to consider which language can be easily learnt in a short time. Our countrymen need to first learn Assamese, and when they know it beautifully, then they can think of learning other languages.'[87] The clinching argument for this was taken from the rival's camp, where 'the Bengalis made it a point to study various languages and various kinds of books, and thereby managed to render their language beautiful, successfully advancing the cause of civilisation ('sabhyata')'.[88]

The cultures to be emulated by the Assamese were those dual interlocutors of modernity, the Bengali and the English. 'That very English language which is now at the head of all other languages, and possesses all manner of books which advance

---

[85] Ibid.
[86] While 'matri-bhasha' was a new formulation, the eighteenth century poets used 'swadeshi bhasha' to refer to Assamese. Therefore, the writer's use of both terms as synonyms for each other actually brings the new and old conceptions of language together. 'Swadeshi bhasha' would cease to be used after this, displaced by the 'affective' impact of 'matri-bhasha' with which it had now to compete.
[87] "Letter from Calcutta," Orunodoi, August 1853.
[88] Ibid.

knowledge was formerly unloved; but now, in the eyes of the people of its country, it has become a prominent language.'[89] While this dismal past of English was an encouraging prospect for the colonised to contemplate, the author went on to briefly indicate the competitive relationship between English and the vernaculars. 'Just as many people in our country adore the Bengali language, similarly many Bengalis used to adore the English language, but now that their language has been improved they have been won over by it.'[90] While the Bengali would be emulated, at the same time, a separate space for the Assamese should be carved out. English had led the way for both these Indian vernaculars, but a frisson of nervousness was indicated about the danger it could pose. This was where 'adoration of matri-bhasha' came in, which could lead smoothly onto the ultimate objectives, beauty for language and civilised status for its people. A caveat is required here – since the indigenous publicist's rendering of the competition between vernaculars should not obscure how European languages and literary genres were capturing the lion's share of prestige, profit and power.[91] The friction between Indian languages such as Hindi and Urdu or between Assamese or Oriya and Bengali helped to elide the actual power reality of the colonial setting, where English was the gainer. Each of these vernaculars was struggling for a very small share of the colonial pie, the bulk of which was destined to go elsewhere.

In a situation where artifice was inexorably operating upon these vernaculars, it was essential to portray the process as being as natural as possible, hence the recourse to organic metaphors of home and friendship. The writer of these letters was at the vanguard of a new intelligentsia, initially based around the educational opportunities that Calcutta provided.[92] While the student outflow to Bengal institutions from Assam

---

[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ramaswamy, *Passions*, p.9.
[92] By 1862, over 56% of all undergraduates were from outside Calcutta. From the 1870s, as four new colleges were established by members of the bhadralok (Metropolitan Institute was founded in 1872 by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Albert College in 1881, City College in 1882 by Ananda Mohan Bose and Presidency Institution (later Ripon College) in 1884 founded by Surendra Nath Banerji), their affordable fees and less stringent admission requirements meant that a large number of poorer and provincial students gravitated there. By the 1880s, while the fee at Presidency College was Rs 12 pm and missionary colleges were charging Rs 5 pm, bhadralok colleges charged only Rs 3 pm. By 1885, the Metropolitan Institute had an enrolment twice that of any other college and the 4 bhadralok colleges, taken together, had more students than either government or missionary colleges. Most of the Assamese publicists of this period seem to have enrolled in the former. See John McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind*, Canberra, 1983, pp.46-55 and Padmadhar Gohain Barua, *Mor Soworoni*, Guwahati, 1968.

was relatively small, this was increasingly the destiny that the sons of the caste Hindu gentry were aspiring towards.[93] Anandaram was the first of a new breed, with family connections bolstered by modern education leading him into a successful career as the first magistrate to be appointed in Assam from the ranks of its locals. This world of what Sumit Sarkar calls 'chakri', the monotony of clerical drudgery, required elevation by some higher purpose - directed towards achieving unnati for the new collective community of the homeland.[94] So did the student existence, the chatrasamaj carving out a space for itself in the unfriendly urban space of Calcutta. It was in this contexts that the intelligentsia proclaimed the existence of an immutable self for language, premised upon its dual status as mother-tonue and literary medium.

From the 1870s, college students such as Gunabhiram Barua, Lakshminath Bezbarua and Padmanath Gohain Barua were making the transition from a forum controlled by others to setting up their own print enterprises. Despite their slender material resources, they managed to publish magazines, write poetry, essays, schoolbooks and novels, as part of their identification with language/literature/land. Within the indigenous literary sphere, language was being portrayed as the mainspring of identity. In Calcutta, the act of writing was becoming a virtual rite of passage for these young men.[95] Most of the first Assamese print productions originated as texts written by these students, organised round the weekly tea parties of the Assamese Students' Literary (ASL) Club and then through the Assamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha (ABUSS -'Society for the Progress and Regeneration of the Assamese Language').[96]

The Orunodoi continued to be circulated and read, well after its publication had become very irregular, in homes and schools across the Assam valley.[97] The 'imagined community' of Assamese readers that the Calcutta letter writer had

---

[93] See Chapter 3 of the dissertation.
[94] Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, Delhi, 1997, pp.186-215.
[95] Padmadhar Gohain Barua, *Mor Soworoni*.
[96] Lakshminath Bezbarua, *Mor Jivan Sowaran*, Guwahati, 1944, p.48.
[97] One of its later editors, Mrs S. Ward stated that the Orunodoi appeared until 1880. The most comprehensive collection, in the British Library, only has its issues until the 1860s. It is possible that the American Baptist collections in the United States have some of the missing ones. But it seems that the discouraging response from the Assam valley had meant that the 1870s caused the periodical to be brought out only sporadically. None of the Assam repositories have any issues going beyond the 1850s.

envisaged was forming itself all through those years. It would take a few years before Gunabhiram Barua's periodical the Assam Bandhu, appeared from Calcutta, its editorials using the same idiom of friendship and common purpose that had been pioneered in the Orunodoi.[98] While its life span was brief, it would be succeeded by others, such as the Jonaki, the Bahi, and finally in the 1920s, the first sustained effort at a vernacular newspaper, the Assamiya.[99] As in other parts of India, journals came to be the main vehicle of literary expression and of public debate, as they chronicled literary and political activities, events and public involvement in them and mirrored changes in taste and fashion over time.[100] Despite being 'badly financed and equipped', this new public culture disseminated itself 'among rural landholders, schoolmasters and the clerical classes'.[101] It was through such writings, and the interactions in the metropolitan space that the new language was being 'ordered', and 'adored'. Unlike Haliram or Anandaram, for Gunabhiram Barua and his successors, Assamese would be the only acceptable literary vehicle, and its new periodicals would disseminate it from Calcutta into the body space of the homeland.

Paradoxically, this intelligentsia continued to have close connections with Bengali, in their social and familial lives. Most of them were very aware that their encounter with the accoutrements of modernity itself had come through the mediation of the Bengali. Especially among the Calcutta-based chatrasamaj, admiration for Bengali achievement was considerable. Such sentiments were shared by other provincial groups, as the writings of Hindi and Oriya publicists testify. Orsini delineates the contours of their relationship with the Bengali, the conduit for Western modernity.

---

[98] Gunabhiram Barua ed., Assam Bandhu, Calcutta, 1885-6.

[99] The Jonaki was published from Calcutta between 1883 and 1899 and from Guwahati between 1901 and 1903. The Bahi was published from Calcutta in 1909 and then from Guwahati, with Lakshminath Bezbarua as editor. The Mau was published from Calcutta between 1886 and 1887 by Bolinarayan Barua. Since he was in government service, his brother Haranarayan acted in his name. The Sadhana appeared for a few years in the 1920s from Guwahati under the aegis of the All Assam Muslim Students Association, but only a few fragmentary issues are extant. The Assam Bilasini and Assam Tara periodicals which the Auniati Satra published in the late nineteenth century from its press at Jorhat have left practically no traces. In the 1880s, Hemchandra Barua and others made an attempt at running an Anglo-Assamese newspaper, the Assam News from Guwahati but it did not survive for long. A few of its reports are quoted in the RNP. Thus, the Assamiya (published by the Agarwala business family as a weekly newspaper from Dibrugarh and then from Guwahati - between 1918 and 1947) was to all intents and purposes, the first vernacular newspaper for the region. This explains the paucity of systematic information until the 1920s.

[100] Francesca Orsini, "The Hindi Public Sphere," Unpublished Dissertation, Delhi, 1994, p.8.

[101] Memorandum submitted by Government of Assam, *Report of Indian Statutory Commission, 1928-9*, Vol. 14, Government of India, 1930, p.37.

'Distinctively urban and anglicised in clothes and lifestyle, often highly educated and at the forefront of public sphere activities, Bengalis appeared very much the direct model to imitate.'[102] For instance, Padmanath Gohain Barua devoted a long section to his autobiography to the story of his encounter with Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a pivotal moment for the writer he was aspiring to be.[103]

The historian Amalendu Guha has listed about twenty of the most prominent participants in this emergent Assamese public sphere, more than half married to Bengalis.[104] The most striking examples are Lakshminath Bezbarua and Bolinarayan Bora, the former married to Debendranath Tagore's granddaughter and the latter to R.C. Dutt's daughter, and whose private lives were carried out entirely within Bengali bhadralok circles. Yet both defined their public persona through the Assamese language, most prominently through the Bahi and Mau periodicals, in sharp contrast to the letters chronicling their most intimate thoughts, mostly in Bengali. As far as their public stance was concerned, a slippage into that Bengali self had to be constantly guarded against. In Lakshminath's autobiography, this took the form of a denial of the rumour that he had become a 'ghar jamai' ('a scornful term referring to a son-in-law who lived at his wife's natal home') of the Tagore family, as he narrated how, immediately after his wedding, he went back to live in the Assamese students' mess.[105] In an ironic parallel to the contemporary Bengali public's obsession with the effeminate status that the British were conferring, the Assamese had to constantly reassure themselves that their language struggle would also avoid the emasculation that Bengali domination would bring in its wake. Adoration of Assamese would strengthen not just mother-tongue, but also her sons.

Thus, an admiring emulation of 'Bengali ways' by the provincial sharing in the Calcutta urban culture co-existed with, and could be gradually overwhelmed by darker feelings of victimisation and sectarian competitiveness. The fear of the Bengali as the Other would become stronger over the twentieth century, fuelled by the politics of aspiring communities within the shifting political boundaries of Assam. For the

---

[102] Orsini, "The Hindi," Unpublished, p.4.
[103] Padmanath Gohain Barua, *Mor Sowarani*, p.29.
[104] Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, New Delhi, 1977, Appendix.
[105] Lakshminath Bezbarua, *Mor Jivan Sowaran*, p.68.

majority of the intelligentsia, their student lives in Calcutta were succeeded by a life of chakri in Assam, at the behest of government official or tea planter. The interaction with Bengali there was of quite another order, as the Assamese wrested for professional advancement and social respectability vis-a-vis yet another 'barbarous' variant of Bengali, the Sylhetti babu. A few of the more independent minded Western-educated young men from respectable Assamese families chose to resist the allure of government service, for instance, Lakshminath Bezbarua entered the timber business with Bholanath Barua. But this was the action of a small minority, the bulk of the region's educated youth, like their counterparts in other parts of India and the Empire at large, saw government service as the only feasible profession. The other related, though second choice career involved joining the clerical grades on the plantations. In both these avenues, the Brahmaputra valley men found themselves up against competition from their class counterparts from Sylhet and Bengal, whose assimilation into the apparatus of colonial modernity had come earlier and was seen as giving them an advantage.[106] In the words of a contemporary Assamese publicist, Ratneswar Mahanta, 'in the British epoch, everything is a matter of reading and writing. The functionaries of the past did not have that kind of knowledge. Those who are in official posts, or impart education, they are the leaders of society, and thus Bengalis became so here.'[107] It is in the twofold context of these transactions, one within the metropolis and another within the homeland, that the language encounters of the colonial period would eventually be framed in terms of a cunning conspiracy by the Bengali amla, to eradicate the very existence of Assamese (and of Oriya) by persuading the British policy maker that it was only a dialect of the Bengali language.[108]

---

[106] Of the 938 students matriculating from Calcutta University in 1872, only four were from the schools of the Assam valley. As late as 1898, the number had gone up to only 32. Between 1888 and 1900, 29 of its residents obtained B.A. degrees, compared to 68 from Sylhet. In 1905-6, the Cotton College at Gauhati (founded 1901) had 52 students against the Murarichand College at Sylhet (founded 1892). Cited from Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj*, pp.57-8.

[107] R.M., "Bongali" in Gunabhiram Barua ed., Assam Bandhu, Vol. 3, Calcutta, 1885.

[108] This theory was publicly aired at meetings of the ABUSS and in the Jonaki periodical. Subsequently, it attained wider print circulation when Hem Chandra Goswami and Padmadhar Gohain Barua published *A Note on Assamese Language and Literature*, Calcutta, 1907. Having consolidated itself as a species of 'common sense' in Assamese nationalist lore, the 'amla conspiracy' theory received periodic re-airing in post-colonial language politics, notably during the language riots of the 1960s and the Assam agitation of the 1980s.

4 (5) Standardising Bhasha

We have no means of measuring the influence of Anandaram's scholarly exegesis upon the subsequent evolution of colonial policy. The interventions by the American missionaries with their insistence that the 'exact sciences' should be taught in the vernacular,[109] and the model of this provided by their schools and textbooks appear to have had some impact. C.A. Bayly has pointed to the trend among post-1857 'folklorientalists' to look to 'the rustic and the customary' as opposed to the 'towns and high culture' for administrative understanding.[110] However, it took the administrative changes of the 1870s, with the vast Bengal Presidency separated into a number of smaller units, for the colonial regime to emerge as the champion of Assamese, Oriya, Hindi and other local tongues now upgraded from dialect to language and thus, legitimate vernacular status.[111]

The complete text of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's Assamese primer for schools, Assamiya Lorar Mitra was published posthumously in 1873, edited by his cousin Gunabhiram Barua.[112] This book represented the first in a line of Assamese print productions aiming at furthering an elevated language agenda, with a combination of private initiative and colonial patronage backing them. From the later part of the nineteenth century, colonial officials all over India became active in the modernisation and refinement of the Indian vernaculars. At an all-India level, George Grierson (1851-1941) was one of the prominent figures in this, through the Linguistic Survey of India. With Edward Gait, later a historian of Assam, Grierson resurrected

---

[109] Mills, *Report,* Appendix I-A, Letter from Danforth on the Subject of Education, 19 July 1853, p.89.
[110] C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information, 1780-1870*, Cambridge, 1996, pp.352-8.
[111] It is interesting to see a considerable dichotomy in opinion still evident, alongside a kind of weariness. Thus, one administrator observed, two years after the change in policy, that 'whether Assamese be a distinct language or not from Bengali, it is a sufficiently distinct dialect to render its artificial supercession by Bengali a work of unnecessary time and labour.' C.A. Martin, *General Report on Public Instruction in Assam*, 1877-78, Shillong, 1879, p.5.
[112] Jogendranarayan Bhuyan ed., *Anandaram Dhekial Phukanor Assamiya Lorar Mitra*, Calcutta, 1857 (reprint Guwahati, 1992). The British Library has a number of its editions, for instance from the third to the seventh published from the Goalpara Hitsadhini Press, and the second and the eighth, from the New Arya Press at Calcutta, under the auspices of Gunabhiram Barua. Unusually, the latter provided the figures for its previous print runs, a thousand in each year, except for 2000 in the second edition - during 1873. This means that this primer went through 9000 copies in these years, until the eighth edition which seems the last, in 1880.

Anandaram's arguments about Assamese and its historical lineage.[113] At a local level, an administrator like P.R.T. Gurdon not only played a pivotal role in co-editing and publishing the first dictionary by a native, but also in collecting folk artifacts such as proverbs.[114] Apart from the 'Indo-European' vernaculars with already existing written traditions, the previously unwritten languages of various local groups were also receiving such attentions. While the former were undergoing a complex set of changes at the hands of the colonial intelligentsias, the latter seemed to the British to require resuscitation by external agency. Even the first half of the nineteenth century had seen pioneering officials such as Brian Hodgson and missionaries such as Nathan Brown compiling vocabularies from 'Indo-Chinese' languages. But the most comprehensive endeavours in this direction came up only in the aftermath of Grierson's Linguistic Survey, with Assam given a prominent place among those 'parts of India which seem to have had each a special Tower of Babel of its own'.[115]

The intelligentsia of the Assam Valley, much more confident after 1874 with their language enshrined as the official vernacular, were now taking on the mantle of condescending to lesser variants. As Pollock has pointed out, such vernacular intellectuals were consciously defining their literary culture in opposition to something larger, and thereby constructing a distinct geocultural space for themselves. The corollary for this enshrining of the local particular would be that it would need to assert itself as dominant and dominating over smaller cultural spaces.[116] The policy issue had emerged as one of authority to decide the official standard, and with the aid of colonial officials, the caste Hindu Assamese was claiming this ground for the language it was claiming as its patrimony. A project central to their consolidation of modern print Assamese was Hemchandra Barua's 'voluminous dictionary named Hem-Kos' which aimed at replacing its predecessor, the Dictionary compiled by the

---

[113] See George Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. 1, Government of India, 1927, p.56 where he characterised buranjis as the 'national literature' of Assam. Also "Assamese Literature: Communicated by Geo. A. Grierson," Indian Antiquary, March 1896.

[114] P.R.T. Gurdon and Hem Chandra Goswami ed., *Hem Kosha*, Guwahati 1900. See Preface by Gurdon. Also his *Assamese Proverbs*, Calcutta, 1920. We see him commending Padmanath Gohain Barua as 'a rising young man...[who] writes in pure Assamese and does not over-Sanskritise or introduce Bengali words unnecessarily... [a] real friend to his countrymen and their language'. In Padmanath Gohain Barua, *Assam Buranji* (reprint) Tezpur, 1907.

[115] George Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. 2, Government of India,1927, p.21.

[116] Pollock, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular," p.8.

American missionary Miles Bronson.[117] Hem Barua's claim was that the Rev. Bronson's 'orthography is wholly incorrect and in respect of meanings too it is not what it should have been. Assamese learners are in no way benefited by it, nor will they be'.[118] The author had completed it by 1890 but it was not published until 1900, when a consortium of colonial officials, P.R.T. Gurdon, E.A. Gait and the then Lieutenant Governor, Henry J. Cotton, came together to provide editorial and financial patronage.[119] Hem Barua had previously written an Assamese grammar, published from the mission press in 1867, which he stated to be 'modeled on Sanskrit grammar' and to have pioneered 'clearcut rules for spelling and syntax'.[120] But his magnum opus, modeled upon 'Webster's English Dictionary'[121] had to wait for publication until the government was willing to provide the wherewithal. This was partly because of the expense due to its sheer bulk and partly due to his trenchant criticism of Bronson's effort, which meant that none of the existing presses in Assam would take it on. But its belated publication can be seen as marking the moment when Assamese was crowned with a seal of official approval, as it were, coincidentally at the same moment when its first external patrons, the missionaries were shifting their attention elsewhere.

What one sees, over these decades of colonial rule is a shifting terrain of language debate, in symbiosis with the shifts in official thinking and policy on this issue. For the first few decades of British rule, the discussion over language in Assam had almost exclusively taken the form of supplications to the state. The use of Bengali as the official language was supported by an early generation of administrators on the grounds that the progress of a backward region such as Assam depended on the use of a more developed language, Bengali. It was the occasion of Mill's report on the

---

[117] Miles Bronson, *A Dictionary in Assamese and English*, Sibsagar, 1867. This was the only published dictionary until Barua's garnered sufficient financial backing in 1900. Bronson's preface defended the use of Assamese in preference to Bengali, and explained that the system of orthography he had used was that of 'Joduram Borua, a learned Assamese Pundit, which it is believed much better corresponds with the actual pronunciation of the people than any other system met with'. But clearly, a new intelligentsia, more interested in Sanskritic lineage than popular usage, had become restive with this system by the later part of the nineteenth century. Jaduram Barua of Sibsagar prepared a Bengali and Assamese wordbook in 1839 which Captain Jenkins later gave to the Baptist Mission. He can therefore be regarded as one of the dubhashi generation.

[118] Hem Barua, *Parhasalia Abhidan*, Guwahati, 1892, Preface.

[119] Gurdon etc, *Hem Kosha*.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Hem Barua, *Parhasalia Abhidan*, Preface.

condition of Assam in 1853-4 that set the ball rolling for intervention by non-official opinion.[122] Anandaram and his missionary had sent in memorandums recommending the use of Assamese as an official language. Faced with the unanimity in local opinion, Mill's Report agreed that Assamese should replace Bengali and a new generation of British officials, American missionaries and Assamese intelligentsia were coming around to this view. However, implementation of Assamese as an official language had to await Assam's separation as a Chief Commissioner's Province. This administrative remapping itself contained the seeds of new tensions, with Assam's status as a revenue deficit province causing its amalgamation with the border districts of Goalpara and Sylhet, with their affiliations to Bengali cultural mores.

Despite the whitewashing efforts of later 'language hagiographers', class and ethnic tensions were visible even during the first attempts by missionaries to order Assamese into a print vernacular. The first such effort was by the Baptist Mission at Serampore as part of William Carey's ambitious plan of rendering the Scriptures into as many Indian vernaculars as possible. To this end, the New Testament was translated into Assamese by the Serampore missionaries in 1813 with the help of a pundit called Atmaram Sharma. However, when the American Baptists started work in the Brahmaputra Valley a few years later, they found it so overly Sanskritised so as to be incomprehensible to the local people, and had to start all over again. Perhaps this experience of over-reliance on written rather than spoken usage influenced their linguistic usage in the first decades of the Orunodoi periodical, which was heavily colloquial, based upon the spoken ujani variant of the Sibsagar area where the press was sited.

A pivotal figure here was Nidhi Levi Farwell, the first 'native' convert, an orphan from a low caste background who had been baptised in 1841. He was the most energetic of the Assamese Christians involved in the Orunodoi project, with at least two or more pieces by him in almost every issue of the periodical. However, the style and subject matter of Nidhi's writings were as far removed as he was, socially

[122] Mills, *Report*, Memorials by Danforth and Muneeram.

speaking, from Assam's emergent intelligentsia. As they developed a modern literary style which sought to refine Assamese syntax and orthography in a 'high' Sanskritised direction, they began to take issue with the Orunodoi over its use of everyday idiom.[123] The periodical's distinctive colloquial register, approximating as far as possible to the spoken vernacular, was most visible in the writings of this individual from a non-literati background. Ultimately, the missionaries acceded to using the orthography and syntax that the Assamese intelligentsia was establishing as the standard. Despite Nidhi's opposition to this step, the capitulation was more or less inevitable. The domination that missionary language patronage had enjoyed during the periodical's first decades had gradually becoming redundant. By the turn of the century, growing access to an urban print culture and state patronage had allowed the caste Hindu literati to establish a stranglehold over linguistic matters. Their flagstaff periodicals, the Jonaki and Bahi, usually carried at least one piece on the Assamese language in each issue, which served to set the standards for language use.[124]

Increasingly, the tendency was to plot a genealogy which could emphasise the dominance of the caste Hindu intelligentsia over the geocultural space of this language-as-literature. The first such attempt was in the 1920s, by Hem Chandra Goswami in his multi-volume Assamiya Sahityar Chaneki ('Typical Selections from Assamese Literature'). This had been published through the munificence of an Assamese businessman[125] as a textbook for the newly introduced Assamese language course at the University of Calcutta.[126] The next major effort came from the novelist and amateur ethnologist, Rajani Kanta Bordoloi, during his presidential speech at the Asom Sahitya Sabha's annual session in 1925.[127] For both Goswami and Bordoloi, their 'history of literature' was not to be circumscribed by genre, with puranic texts, collections of aphorisms, medicinal treatises, poetry, drama and the modern school textbooks by their contemporaries all entering that common space, separated neatly

---

[123] Gurdon etc, *Hem Kosha*, Introductory remarks by Hem Barua.
[124] For instance, the Jonaki ran a series of essays entitled "Assamiya Bhasha" by Hem Chandra Goswami in its 1890 issues. Padmanath Gohain Barua mentioned in his autobiography how this series had affected him, enabling him to make the connection between mother-tongue and jatiya ('national') literature, the glory of the Ahom past and the future destiny of the Assamese language, the causes to which he then vowed to dedicate his life. See Gohain Barua, *Mor Soworoni*, p.27.
[125] The timber merchant Bholanath Barua donated Rs 10,000 for this.
[126] Hem Chandra Goswami ed., *Assamiya Sahityar Chaneki*, Calcutta, 1923-29 (7 parts in 3 volumes).
[127] Hazarika, *Asom Sahitya*.

into chronological periods. Lacking other limitations upon 'literature', the parameter of selection was set by what the category 'Assamese' should denote. Significantly, while the bartaman ('contemporary period') was taken to be from 1800 onwards, the 'transitional texts' of the early nineteenth century by Haliram Dhekial Phukan and Maniram Barbhandar Barua were omitted from this list. The dubhashi culture they represented was one that could no longer be countenanced.

It is noteworthy that even this selective appropriation necessitated a certain degree of amnesia about the canon it was constructing. The devotional literature of Assamese Vaishnavism which it enshrined as the 'origin' of this literature was certainly not susceptible to the same standard of 'linguistic purity' that it was demanding from its modern representatives. Thus, the preface to a volume of Bargeet ('devotional songs') published under the auspices of the Auniati Gosain in 1887 stated that 'these were songs about Shri Krishna set in different raags and raaginis', which had been 'composed by Shri Sankardeb and Shri Madhabdeb'. But, as regards their language ('bhasha'), the editor professed himself as unable to come to any conclusion as he could discern traces of 'Assami, Kamrupi, Bangali, Hindustani, Brajbuli, Musalmani, Oriya etc' but could not understand why 'a book written in Assam should have so many different languages within its scope'.[128] In his bewilderment, we can discern the clash between a vernacular culture of the past – one that had been adept at switching mood and register to suit its purpose - and a burgeoning modern desire for language and nation uniformity.

With the canon being set by these stalwarts of the ABUSS, new authors and texts could be judged on the basis of their shortcomings, either of language or of position. An obscure text called Lukir Buranji by a local revenue official, Maulvi Muhammad Shah Haji Mauzadar serves as a prime example of the condescension displayed towards those deemed to be on the 'periphery' of proper Assamese. The text was prefaced by a commendation from Hem Chandra Goswami and Sarbeswar Sarma, who praised 'the standard of the language' used by such 'a member of the Musalman

[128] *Bargeet*, Jorhat, 1887, Preface.

community'.[129] However, the prominence given to this commendation is itself testimony of the internalisation of such attitudes by their subjects. For instance, the editorials of Sadhana, the organ of the Assamiya Musalman Yuva Sanmilan, repeatedly exhorted Muslims to improve their command of their mother-tongue, Assamese.[130] This lack of linguistic confidence from a Muslim intelligentsia was particularly remarkable when juxtaposed against the proud claim of a typical member of the caste Hindu literati, the 'Assamese Webster' Hem Barua.

> I solicit the liberty to say that Assamese is my mother tongue and I have paid particular attention to it for upwards of 18 years past and have also written and published four or five books in the language, one of which is a grammar of the same. Besides I possess a tolerably fair knowledge of Sanskrit which is admittedly the parent of Assamese. Such being the case, if I cannot write good and elegant Assamese, I can at least, I think, write the language correctly in every respect.[131]

In this context, Walter Ong's suggestion seems apposite, that, 'where grapholects exist, 'correct' grammar and usage are popularly interpreted as the grammar and usage of the grapholect itself to the exclusion of the grammar and usage of other dialects'.[132] The hegemony acquired by the equation between mother-tongue and official language had ensured that only the higher echelons of Assamese society came within its ambit since others were stigmatised as speakers of vulgar, incorrect dialects. Even within the so-called caste population, while the peasant or woman was constantly a subject of their improving discourse, the intelligentsia was far from regarding them as equal participants in the vernacular public that it was creating. Such exclusions were even more obvious when it came to the many tribal groups whose speeches had no Sanskritic lineage or written pedigree at all. It is noteworthy that in the entire discussion around language that we have considered, the multilingual context of the majority of Assam's population had been completely erased. While ignoring the claim of such 'inferior' speeches to language status, a major part of the Asom Sahitya Sabha's agenda was to disseminate Assamese among their speakers – the 'tribal' and coolie population of Assam. At the same time, the acquisition of language by such dialect ridden groups could not totally erase the

---

[129] Muhammad Shah, *Lukir Buranji*, Calcutta, 1922.
[130] Sadhana, Guwahati, 1922-26.
[131] J.N. Goswami, *Hemchandra Barua*, New Delhi, 1987, pp.28-9.
[132] Ong, *Orality*, p.108.

stigma of their subordinate relationship to language-as-literature, and thus, to the status of identity-as-nation. Hem Chandra Goswami made this clear in his presidential speech at the Sahitya Sabha session in 1920.

> The jati without a literature is dead even whilst it lives. A literature-less jati becomes unable to keep itself alive as soon as it comes into the vicinity of another jati. We do not have to go far to find an example of this – those thousands of tea garden coolies who come into our country year after year – they have no national literature and therefore at some point they will become indistinguishable from the people of this country. They will never be able to preserve their national life.[133]

4 (6) The hills beyond Assamese?

By the last part of the nineteenth century, a new official thrust towards 'pacifying' the hills meant that the Northeastern frontier of British India was moving further eastwards, towards the previously unadministered regions of the Naga and Lushai Hills. It is worthy of note that at the time when Risley, Thurston and others were emphasising anthropometry as the definitive method for race study, it was language that was portrayed as an identifying marker for race by most of their counterparts in the administrative establishment of Assam.

> Without an understanding of the language of a tribe, there can be no adequate investigation of its institutions; the speech is the expression of the mind of the people who speak it, the measure of their culture and outlook upon the world around them. It is, moreover, in Assam, with its vast diversity of ethnic stocks, the only safe index to the affinities of a tribe with its neighbours, and in the almost complete absence of historic record or remembered tradition, to the migrations which have brought the various units to their present sites.[134]

Such statements also serve to modify the commonly held assumption that colonial and official opinion can be viewed as a rigid monolithic body. Not only were there tremendous shifts across time, but as this shows, across space, with local officials on this Northeast Frontier having their own, idiosyncratic views which did not subscribe to the all India satraps. A 'local particularity' can be discerned in their abiding interest, stemming from the days of Hodgson, in the notion of wide ranging racial migrations. It is this context that we can situate the prominence that this school of official ethnography gave to language. However, the emphasis upon the 'no less than

---

[133] Hazarika, *Asom Sahitya*.
[134] T.C. Hodson, *The Meitheis*, London, 1908, Introduction by Sir Charles Lyall.

eighteen distinct languages within our border, besides the multitude spoken by the wild tribes beyond the frontier' should not obscure the fact that simultaneously, overarching unities were being traced for those languages and it was the latter which allowed the 'multitude' of tribes to be arranged into patterns of ancient races. Risley's nasal and skull indices were complemented, if not overshadowed by the tradition of the vocabularies collected by Nathan Brown and Brian Hodgson, supplemented at a later period by Grierson's linguistic endeavours.

The most enduring result of this policy was the series of monographs that were published in the wake of Sir Charles Elliott's instructions, shortly after assuming the government of the province in 1881, for compilation not only of grammars, vocabularies and phrasebooks of the languages of all the leading tribes of Assam, but also of records of their customs and institutions. In a way, the writers of these monographs represented the new breed of official in Assam who championed the local claims to be unique, whether at the level of language or culture or political identity. These texts, structured as they were with copious appendices, sketches and photographs, vocabularies, folk tales, buttressed the administrator's claim to be an expert on the tribes, the Naga, Mikir, Kachari - and many others - who came under their gaze.[135] We can view them as narratives intersecting with, as well as modifying already occurring discourses on race, caste, tribe and language, in a situation where colonial rule was deeming it advisable to segregate 'hill tribes' from the rest of the province by the new Inner Line Regulations.[136] The theories of language descent seem to confirm this as when it was declared that 'the languages of the non-Aryan tribes...do not seem to have contributed to the vocabulary of Assamese (which, like Bengali, rests in the main upon a foundation of Sanskrit) in any greater degree than Welsh has contributed to our modern English'.[137] This is a revealing comparison made by a British administrator of the later nineteenth century, given the way in

---

[135] Some of these monographs were Charles Lyall, *The Mikirs, from the Papers of the Late Edward Stack*, London, 1908; T.C. Hodson, *The Meitheis*, London, 1908; A. Playfair, *The Garos*, London, 1909; Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis*, London, 1911; J.H. Hutton, *The Angami Nagas, with Some Notes on Neighbouring Tribes*, London, 1921; and J.P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, London, 1926.
[136] B.B. Misra, *The Unification and Division of India*, Delhi, 1990, pp.153-5.
[137] B.C. Allen, *Census of India, 1901*: Vol. 4: Assam: Part 1, *Report*, Shillong, 1902, p.121.

which the relationship between Wales and England had developed as a clash between two cultural systems unequal in power and status as well as in their self-images.

It was in this same period that the American Baptists were resigning their interest in the Assamese language, discouraged by the sluggish response to their religious agenda. This was part of a general rethinking about missionary methodology, accompanied by an acceptance of the greater potential for success among lower caste and 'tribal' people in different parts of India. This changed strategy was only possible in Assam, however, with a free hand being given by the colonial state to missionary work in the hill areas, beyond the areas demarcated by the Inner Line. Despite misgivings among certain officials, by the end of the century, British administrative policy had accepted missions as intermediaries for 'indirect rule' in the hill territories adjoining the Assam valley where revenue could hardly compensate even for bare administrative costs. Since the only viable returns would be 'souls', the missions came to enjoy a monopoly over literacy and health facilities which had never been possible in the plains. In the Brahmaputra valley, print culture had been ~~introduced~~ pioneered by the mission, but it had developed there against an existing infrastructure of a literate gentry and a written tradition. The Orunodoi had opened up new possibilities which a modernising gentry was quick to appropriate to its own ends.

This was very different from the situation in the hills, whether for the Welsh Presbyterians in the Khasi Hills or the American Baptists among the Garo, Naga and Mizo people. In those territories, the shift to literacy was itself mediated through these missionaries and their message of Christian 'improvement'. The first missionary forays had been undertaken through the agency of Assamese converts – such as Godhula, who was sent as a preacher to the Naga hills. Success was rapid, unlike the Brahmaputra valley – and among the Garo, for instance, locals themselves were soon running their own churches.[138] Initially, contact had been made in the hills through the the Assamese or the Bengali languages. But gradually, the Baptists set to identifying standard dialects and reducing tribal tongues to writing.

---

[138] F.S. Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, Guwahati, 1969, p.47.

In 1864, official policy for the hill districts had declared that instruction should be either in English or in the indigenous language expressed in Roman script, and that Bengali should be used wherever there was demand for it. But as British administrative reach expanded into wider stretches of 'wild' territory, differences of opinion emerged over this issue. While the Gauhati officials such as Jenkins tended to support the use of the larger vernaculars, local officials such as Gregory, the Political Officer in the Naga hills, advocated using English, along with a local idiom such as Angami, written in Roman script. Gregory countered Jenkins' arguments about administrative convenience by arguing that hill people learning the plains language meant acquiring 'all the worst habits of chicanery and trickery of plainsmen as well as absurd prejudices of caste from which they were originally free'.[139] The arguments ranged on, but the government finally placed the onus for educational materials, and their language, upon the missionaries in the field. In 1893, the American Baptist Union formally decided that Roman script be used to transcribe the languages of all the hill tribes they were working with. There was once again the hope that, in the future 'they could touch hands over the hills'.[140] The 'general information' that the Orunodoi had concentrated on was no longer as important to the missionary agenda. Now it was scriptural and pedagogical texts in newly enscripted tribal languages which comprised the bulk of their productions.[141]

As far as the Assamese intelligentsia was concerned, anxieties about the limited reach of Assamese did mean that occasionally there were attempts to outline a more inclusive genealogy, within which other groups could participate more fully. Despite the sharpening of boundaries between 'Aryan' and 'non-Aryan', an influential publicist Kaliram Medhi did go as far as to assert, in the 1930s, that it was inaccurate to regard Assamese as a Sanskritic language, due to the close relationship it had with

---

[139] Bengal Judicial Proceedings, No. 57, October 1866, OIOC.

[140] *Assam Mission Third Triennial Conference Report*, Nowgong, 1893, p.8.

[141] We can take the instance of one such language, Khasi, which acquired its Romanised script and standard print form during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The material and educational patronage received for it from Welsh and American missionaries was buttressed by the development of an indigenous middle-class. This encouraged the growth of local networks centreing around commerce, education, print journalism and church activity – mostly located at the town of Shillong, the hill-station that the British had established to act as their Assam headquarters. The first Khasi newspapers actually predated the regular appearance of an Assamese one.

the 'Indo-Chinese languages' of the region.[142] But, on the whole, there was an unwillingness to concede that multilingual affiliations were possible, a deliberate elision that was mirrored in other parts of the sub-continent and one that increased in scope as migrations rendered its regions more and more multi-ethnic. For instance, the rhetoric of the Asom Sahitya Sabha was to the effect that, to be 'Assamese', a Bodo or a Khasi was required to unilaterally submit to the Assamese language - in every sphere, public and private.[143] As the chapter has attempted to show, such 'nationalist' attitudes had easily built themselves upon a foundation of colonial assumptions about 'order, hierarchy and evolutionary distance' as suitable principles for language policy.[144] The notion of hierarchical relations among languages meant that once official policy had recognised the legitimacy of Assamese, it would receive priority over 'less developed' varieties, until other policy constraints came into play. Eventually, in independent India, the hegemonic politics earlier associated with Bengali were to be replicated by Assamese and create similar resentment among smaller groups who saw their speech modes being dismissed as uncouth dialects.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the way in which language became the location for encounters between colonial ideologies and institutions with local elites. It theorises these as 'dialogic' rather than confrontationist, with a considerable interaction between indigenous and Western theories of race and civilisation serving as the backdrop to many of the processes under discussion. At the same time, it stresses that there was a fundamental break with older ways in which language communities in South Asia had conceived of themselves. A hierarchy was now coming to the fore, between language and dialect, between Aryan and non-Aryan genealogies for vernaculars and their literatures and between English and the vernaculars. Gendered

---

[142] Kaliram Medhi, *Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese Language*, Guwahati,1934 (reprint 1988).

[143] 'Missionary' activity was taken up by the Asom Sahitya Sabha to propagate Assamese, in the early years of the twentieth century. Goalpara, the scene for active contestation with Bengali was one venue, and the most successful, but similar efforts were made in other areas, such as Kohima, with projects such as the Preeti Sanmilan in 1935. There appears to have been active involvement in this Naga Hills project by members of linguistically marginal groups such as Prasad 'Gurkha' Rai - from the small Nepali settler community.

[144] Fabian, *Language*, p.48.

imaginings were intrinsic to these conceptions of language belonging – as shown by the imagery of mother-tongue deployed by a predominantly masculine public.

The chapter has traced how an emergent alliance between missionaries, local intelligentsia and officials was able to shift the balance of power in language politics towards 'local particularity' – represented by a 'historicised' Assamese. However, a residual uncertainty vis-à-vis other Indian vernaculars meant that the consolidation of Assamese was sought to be achieved through the displacement of 'uncivilised' status onto the region's 'tribal', non-Aryan, preliterate tongues. This was possible also because Assamese was in use not solely among the dominant caste Hindu publicists but also within the 'alternative' publics which began to appear from the early years of the twentieth century. A 'tribal' language such as Bodo was deemed suitable for pedagogy by the missionaries, but as yet, not for cultural or political assertion. Assamese still possessed sufficient flexibility to be acceptable as an instrument for assertion by those speakers of Bodo who sought to reshape their individual and community identity along 'modern' lines. However, there was considerable potential for faultlines to appear within this space of language belonging. The acrimonious language politics of post-colonial Northeast India have taken this route - with battlelines drawn between Bengali and Assamese, between Bodo and Assamese, and within Bodo itself.

V Creating Community, 'Imagining' Nation

Introduction

This final chapter explores some of the 'imaginings' of community and nation that being Assamese seemed to require by the first part of the twentieth century. It examines race, caste, tribe and gender as the formative nodes of expressing and redefining community and social identity. While recognising the utility of Habermas's theory of the 'public sphere',[1] it engages with this heuristic device in the form of its modifications by Geoff Eley, Nancy Fraser and others who have pointed out the significance of 'multiple, sometimes overlapping or contending public spheres'.[2] Such a framework recognises that the constitution and conduct of these publics necessarily involved conflict, contested meanings and exclusion, most notably in the field of gender. It examines their interactions with constructions of nation, and how caste and religious community in modern South Asia have been inextricably interwoven into the parallel emergence of gendered social identities.

Recent historiographies of imperialism have focused attention upon how modern capitalism initiated a reordering of knowledge in terms of racial essences with both the West and the Orient constructed into a realm of ideas, obscuring the more material histories connecting these worlds.[3] Rather than viewing this process as an imposition of the metropole's categories upon a undifferentiated colonised domain, we need to focus upon the specifics of these interactions. This involves tracing the connections for ethnography and race science with discourses taking shape in different localities within the 'periphery', and at different moments. This chapter examines the multiple public arenas operating in Assam from the later part of the nineteenth century, wherein we see the appropriation of Aryan race theory and Orientalist caste wisdom by vernacular publicists,

---

[1] Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, tr. T. Burger, Cambridge, Mass., 1992.

[2] Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," and Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in Craig Calhoun ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992, pp. 289-339 and pp. 109-42.

[3] Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Manchester, 1995, p.13.

'imagining' communities in often overlapping, as well as contestatory modes - variously as Kachari, Bodo, Kaivarta, Ahom, Assamese, Indian. However, the bulk of the chapter concentrates upon developments in the post-World War I period, when the greater penetration of educational institutions, print capitalism and the possibilities, however scanty, of political representation enabled a certain broadening of the public voices whose historical traces it seeks out. By the 1920s, a critical mass of literati and communication networks was interacting with the state, and through this process, we can discern the gradual coalescence of 'civil society'.

Through their actions and the texts they produced, I analyse how participants in these arenas constructed the 'communities' for which they acted. I start with examining the nodes around which the dominant Assamese public was structuring itself around - notions of jati, buranji and unnati. I show how upper caste publicists were attempting to project a purified identity using the rhetoric of Aryanism as well as of a redeployed neo-Vaishnavite devotionalism. I go on to explore some of the workings of the segmented publics that were both overlapping and contesting the former - the Kachari, the Kaivarta, the Ahom. The colonial state's interlocutory role within this entire process, at an institutional level as well as through its functionaries requires emphasising. We should also note the fact that its interactions with the local status system continued to retain a degree of fluidity, perhaps longer than in other parts of the South Asian mainland. At the same time, as the linguistic hegemony of Assamese gained ground, older differences of status and rank were being modified into newer identities coalescing around affiliations to mother-tongue and homeland. Finally, I return to a prominent feature of the dominant Assamese public arena - its imaginings of 'history' through the generation of a heroic past that came to be an inescapable part of the community narratives, and of the national selves to which this period gave birth.

5 (1) *Jati* as Caste/Race

A discussion of social identity in South Asia has to be structured through the various uses of the term *jati*, while maintaining a healthy degree of respect for the minefield of changing significations it provides. This has proved to be one of the

most wide-ranging of Indian vernacular terms. Jati, in its pre-modern incarnation, served as shorthand for multiple and interwoven ways of identification. Contrary to the Indological assumption that 'traditional society' was organised solely along social and religious principles, caste and ritual affiliation were just one among the meanings that jati bore. This process was aided by the way in which political mechanisms selected different kinds of social units/belonging for prominence at different times. Therefore, the study of such units of social identity and their respective relations as part of a complex, conjunctural, political world becomes imperative for the historian who seeks to understand that older world of community belonging, and how jati made its transition into a 'modern' social and political institutional framework.[4]

We can trace part of this process through Haliram Dhekial Phukan's Assam Buranji, written in Bengali in 1829 as a self-professed guide for outsiders to the region.[5] As someone who had adeptly shifted allegiance from the dwindling Ahom state to its British successor, it was fitting that he began his narrative by outlining the political trajectory of the different regimes that had ruled over Assam. This delineation of 'rulers from many jatis' culminated with an account of the Ahoms, the 'descendants of Indra who had defeated many 'parbatiya ('hill') jatis'.[6] It was from that conquest that the names 'A-sam' and A-hom' emerged, derived from the admiring epithet of 'unparalleled' bestowed upon the victorious newcomers by the defeated jatis.[7] In his catalogue of the inhabitants of the territory the Ahoms had brought under their sway, Haliram described them as 'Mikir, Kachari, Garo, Lalung and Miri', 'hill jatis living along the outskirts of the plains, some of whom worship spirits according to their past customs, others now worship Hindu gods'.[8] The Buranii's narrative of Assam came to be structured through the relationship of the land to its people, via these constituent jatis.

---

[4] See Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Yale, 2001.
[5] Haliram Dhekial Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, Calcutta, 1829 (reprint Guwahati, 1962).
[6] Ibid, p.12.
[7] Ibid, p.29.
[8] Ibid, p.86.

A striking feature of the text is that Haliram's palpable concern with adjusting Assam to Indic ritual parameters tended to be interrupted by his reiteration of the region's divergence from those norms. For instance, in the account of the Ahoms, he characterised them as having initially lived in 'a parbatiya manner'. He went on to declare that, even in the present, many still clung to their older beliefs, under the influence of the Bailung priests.[9] Haliram went on to lament that even the Brahmin women of Assam lived in an impure manner, as they spun and wove their own cloth, in the manner of low jatis.[10] These dissonances reveal how the high caste 'Hindu' self that this text was foregrounding could only partially cover the fluctuating histories that Haliram's portrait of Assam had disclosed. Even while describing his own Brahmin jati, Haliram felt bound to include a lengthy discussion of why the Rarhi and Kulin Brahmins of Bengal did not exist in Assam.[11] Clearly, he was seeking to justify the unfamiliar jati schema that his text was offering. This mentioned the Brahmin, Kalita, Daivagna, Keot, Dom, Kachari, Ahom, Miri and Goriya jatis. A noteworthy feature is that while the ritual hierarchy between these jatis was clearly emphasised, they all bore a similar relationship to the desh they were inscribed within. Whether it was the ritually pure Brahmin, the devout but lowly Dom or the Mecca-revering Goriya, Haliram's text did not give any of them a lesser stake in Assam.

In this Assam Buranji, what we can glimpse is an interestingly doubled narrative for jati. In the first instance, Haliram was outlining a ritually ordered teleology of jati progression to Hinduism. But juxtaposed against this was another theme – that of jati participation in transforming mythological Kamrup into contemporary Assam. The text can be distinguished from later neo-buranjis in the relatively nuanced rendering it produced of the category 'parbatiya' jati. Despite Haliram's desire to stress its ritually inferior status to 'Hindu', the 'parbatiya' jati of the narrative managed to remain largely contingent upon the temporal and spatial moorings of different groups of people in Assam. This allows us an insight into an indigenous sensibility about identity – into what appears to be quite a different understanding from the 'savagery' that colonialism would project onto 'hill

[9] Ibid, p.67.
[10] Ibid, p.90.
[11] Ibid, p.87.

dwellers' and 'tribes'. (It should be noted, however, that, Britannia's representatives did occasionally veer in their ascriptions - from a notion of savage 'wildness' to that of savage 'nobility').[12]

By the mid-nineteenth century, jati would be annexed into the ethnographic categories of caste and tribe, with race as the theme structuring them. The scientific thought of the period was reworking notions of indigenous alterity into unchanging race essences, as social classification began to be explained in terms of biological descent. This was a device useful in shoring up threatened hierarchies, both in colonies and metropole. While the term 'race' had been widely used in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, its meaning was then more linguistic and cultural. Race approached ethnology only in the Victorian period, when notions of progressive evolution emerged within a generalised theory of human 'racial types.' European science was now to locate India as a flamboyantly diverse ethnographic problem with notions of evolutionary racial hierarchies and historic race conquests - a belief that civilisation was the unique achievement of ethnologically 'advanced' races, and an insistence on eternal deep-seated antipathies between so-called higher peoples and those of inferior or debased and degenerate 'blood'.[13]

The policy of compartmentalising its subjects that the British empire was to undertake received its ideological shoring in India from the ethnographic imagining of its people. Susan Bayly shows how the speculations about 'castes', 'races' or 'nations' of the colony by scholar-officials such as Campbell, Risley, Gait and others were aimed at placing the authors in the vanguard of scientific thought in the metropole.[14] Geological and ethnological enquiries came together in the idea that human beings, like rocks, were deposited in stratified layers, and that the most recently added stratum was intrinsically superior to the others. Hence, H.H. Risley was able to compare the social gradations of the Indian caste system to a series of geological deposits.

---

[12] See J.H. Hutton, *The Angami Nagas, with Some Notes on Neighbouring Tribes*, London, 1921 for such a romantic rendition of the Naga.
[13] Susan Bayly, "Caste and 'Race' in the Colonial Ethnography of India," in Peter Robb ed., *The Concept of Race in India*, Delhi, 1995, p.168.
[14] Ibid, pp.189-191.

> The successive strata in each series occupy a definite position determined by the manner of their formation, and the varying customs in the one may be said to represent the fossils in the other. The lowest castes preserve the most primitive usages, just as the oldest geological formations contain the simplest forms of organic life.[15]

The first chapter of the dissertation discussed how an influential trend among colonial administrators attempted to order and separate indigenous groups into tribes and castes. This was based upon a discursive framework built around Enlightenment ideas about savages and primitives, and about hunting, pastoralism, agriculture and commerce.[16] In the first decade of the nineteenth century, William Jones had reaffirmed the all-important Aryan conquest myth which would become a cornerstone of ethnological thought about India, and provided later theorists with a parallel between the 'Hindu Aryan' and later Roman, Mughal and British conquerors and dominion-builders.[17] It discovered the 'Aryan' race to be the latest stratum of the geological layers that made up India. This was within the parameters of an emergent ethnological orthodoxy which viewed India as a composite social landscape, where those of superior 'Aryan' blood evolved historically to be defined by a hierarchical, Brahminically defined ideology of 'caste'. As a corollary of this argument, large numbers of other Indians, identified as aborigines, wild tribes, and those of so-called 'mixed' race origins, were portrayed as being ethnologically distinct from this so-called Aryan population, and from caste society.[18]

Precolonial states had intricately woven shifting jati meanings into their systems, but it was with colonial 'modernity' that a paradigmatic shift seems to develop – through the political changes coalescing around the term jati. To a considerable degree, this occurred in relation to the new machinery of counting and classifying, what Sudipta Kaviraj has termed as a definitive transition from

---

[15] Herbert Risley, *People of India*, Calcutta, 1908, Vol. 1, p.206.
[16] See Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India: 1200-1991*, Cambridge, 1999 and Ajay Skaria, "Shades of Wildness; Tribe, Caste and Gender in Western India", The Journal of Asian Studies. 56, (3), August 1997, pp.726-45.
[17] William Jones, "Sixth Discourse," delivered 1789, Asiatick Researches ii, 1807 (5th edition), pp.43-66; and Eighth Discourse, delivered 1791, Asiatick Researches iii, 1807 (5th edition), pp.1-16; cited in Susan Bayly, "Caste and 'Race'", pp.172-3.
[18] Susan Bayly, "Caste and 'Race'", pp.189-191.

'fuzzy' to 'enumerated' boundaries of belonging, albeit within the formal world of centralised data.[19] By the later-nineteenth century, this official apparatus of colonialism was beginning to order the multiple local indices of jati within a pan-Indian locus of varna, or caste. This was to have a tremendous political impact upon the institutional structures of selective representation. But even then, for influential colonial voices such as Hunter and Risley, these remained ethnologically defined relationships: castes were really 'races', and the distinction between high and low caste was between peoples of supposedly superior and inferior racial endowment.[20]

Such a notion of a racial and cultural divide between 'tribes' and 'Hindus', and within caste society itself, was finding general acceptance from various sections of the Indian public. A considerable body of recent work has dwelt on the unexpected directions into which such race and caste wisdom was being drawn by disparate groups of publicists in colonial South Asia.[21] This has gone some way in rescuing such cultural and political processes from being seen as passive victims of a new Western epistemology. Rather, what requires to be emphasised, and further explored, is the variety of very complex interactions between colonial practice and indigenous intellectual and cultural movements. Many of the publicists active in such movements were drawn from the service elites who, in their involvement with Western scholar-officials, started off as interpreters-cum-informants, a role far more interactive than has been realised.

Haliram was one of the earliest participants from the upper-caste gentry of Assamese into this information order. What his text indicates is how this role of dubhashi was inflected by a desire to establish some distance from other groups within indigenous society. The frequent assertions of upper-caste genealogy and normative conduct have to be viewed in this light, as part of a wider re-

---

[19] Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India," in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey ed., *Subaltern Studies VII*, Delhi, 1992, p.1-39.
[20] Susan Bayly, "Caste and 'Race'", pp.198-203.
[21] See Rosalind O' Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*, Cambridge, 1985; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*, Calcutta, 1990 and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in Twentieth Century Punjab*, Berkeley, 1982.

negotiation of Assam, a homeland located uneasily on the periphery of Indic sociology of knowledge and ritual ordering. Participation in the process of gathering colonial knowledge thus provided an opportunity to enhance one's own status in that system as well as in the eyes of an indigenous audience. At the same time, the new information order, by the nature of the print technology and the educational opportunities it instituted, did offer some limited possibilities for mobility for individuals and groups lower down the social ladder.

Race, caste, tribe - these terms signify the sites of complex transactions for groups of indigenous publicists seeking identity within multiple, often contesting arenas of culture and politics. The vernacular term jati shifted in meaning through the period of this study, as local elites' perceptions of land and people were refracted through these new notions. Jati had previously designated a particular group of people possessing relatively fluid, overlapping attributes of ritual, occupational and spatial belonging. Thereby, it signified something broader, and more flexible than what could be indicated by the colonial terminology of 'caste', 'race' or 'religion'. The relatively undifferentiated character of this precolonial sociology of knowledge emerges from a list drawn up by the dubhashi Maniram Barbhandar Barua. It groups the population of Assam into 'Brahmun, Khetree, Boisto and Kyusts, Bor Koleeta, Soroo ditto, Keot, Koch, Koomar Koleeta, Mattee ditto, Hindoo Chooteea, Ahom, Boorook, Kacharee, Moran, Chandal, Toorook, Gooreea, Dom, Haree, Moreea'[22] - a strangely heterogenous assemblage of what would soon be recognised as distinct categories of caste, tribe and religious communities. It is important to keep in mind, however, that only from the later-nineteenth century did 'caste' and 'race' cease to be used interchangeably by colonial ethnography and come to occupy specific slots, a civilisational for the one, and a biological for the other. From the list just delineated, groups such as 'Brahmun' (Brahmin) and Koleeta (Kalita) would seek assimilation to a varna ranking which could win trans-local acceptance. Others such as Kacharee (Kachari) were to be involved in a move from the category of caste to that of tribe. A the same time, they would try to come together with others to 'recover'

---

[22] Mills, *Report*; Appendix K.B., Translation of a Petition from Moneeram Borwah Dewan, p.623.

an 'authentic' Bodo race. Some of its jatis such as Toorook (Turk) or Gooreea (Goriya) would disappear altogether, replaced by a general label of 'Muslim'.

By the early twentieth century, jati was making yet another journey, acquiring an overlapping, sometimes overwhelming signification proximate to 'nation' as it attached itself more particularly to a territorial notion of belonging. Thus, 'Assamese jati' could now, in its broadest reading, include all the previously mentioned jatis, understood variously as caste, tribe or religious category. A precolonial notion of homeland had defined itself in relation to the Bangal who lay beyond its borders, however imprecisely defined. But, at the same time, it seems that the people within the territory of Assam were not yet labelled as Assamiya. Even in the 1850s, a publicist such as Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was wont to speak of 'Asombasis' ('inhabitants of Assam') rather than Assamiya or Assamese.

As the first indigenous voice which asked for the 'swadeshi bhasha' to be used as official language, Anandaram has been annexed as an ancestor by present-day proponents of linguistic regional nationalism. But as we have previously suggested, his personal affiliations to language and jati were far more ambiguous. From his own family's history, we can discern the ease with which the Bangal of a previous generation became an Ahom dangariya. This itself is a telling indicator of precolonial regional belonging as a cultural and political notion rather than ethnic, racial or linguistic. While there were ideological formulations which linked identities such as Vaishnavite or Ahom or Goriya in specific ways, there had been no all-encompassing framework that would make them mutually exclusive of each other. Neither would these links be justified on the basis of an identity's place within a particular social category. Identities were continually constructed and reconstructed, especially by holders-of and aspirants to power.

A few decades after its protean use by Haliram's generation, jati seemed firmly anchored to 'caste/tribe', but by the early twentieth century, 'nation' would arrive to join, and contest, its previous significations. As was the case for other renderings of community identity, jati would be driven as much by exclusion as inclusion.

5 (2) Aryan as the Ancestor of Assamese

The intersection of Victorian scientific and Indic textual knowledge was providing a resource to link these jatis as they reinvented themselves in colonial India, even to connect them with their British rulers. This was the vision of Aryanism, which conflated the race rhetoric of the Western ethnographer with the Sanskrit criteria of 'Arya' respectability to arrive at a 'civilised' self for the caste Hindu. Joan Leopold, Thomas Trautmann and Tony Ballantyne have, between them, mapped the tremendous reach of this imagery for both the British and the Indian publicists of the nineteenth century.[23] The extent of its reach is apparent in the workings of one of the most peripheral of the South Asian public arenas of this period, the Assamese. Morbidly conscious as they were of their location among inclusion in the 'barbarous hordes' inhabiting the Northeastern 'frontier', the Assamese intelligentsia seized upon Aryanism as offering the possibility of filiation to the wider Indic world, as well as to the Hindu jati consolidating itself in the geocultural space of an 'ancient' Aryavarta. This chapter will examine the deployment of Aryanist imagery in the writings of Gunabhiram Barua and Sonaram Choudhury, representing an intelligentsia which was trying to inscribe itself into history through the medium of its 'mother-tongue', Assamese.

The previous chapters of the dissertation have traced Gunabhiram Barua's multifaceted career as government functionary, social activist and literary entrepreneur. Through all these activities, we can posit that his definitive bid for public glory came through his writing of a work on Assam's history, Assam Buranji published in 1875.[24] While the title proclaimed its position within the buranji genre that Haliram Dhekial Phukan had contributed towards, there were substantial discontinuities which this concealed. In the first place, the readership Gunabhiram was speaking to had itself undergone a change, from the Calcutta public whom Haliram had addressed. With this work written in the newly

---

[23] Joan Leopold, "The Aryan Theory of Race, 1870-1920: Nationalist and Internationalist Visions," Indian Economic and Social History Review, (2), September, 1970, pp.271-98; Thomas Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, Berkeley, 1997; Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, Hampshire, 2002.

[24] Gunabhiram Barua, *Assam Buranji*, Calcutta, 1875.

standardised Assamese vernacular, Gunabhiram was staking a claim to such a public within the region. With its readers primarily from the 'rising' middle classes who were entering colonial educational institutions, this text was shaping for them the contours of an Assamese jati, and fixing it in the form of print, in a language which had just received government sanction. This involved another change in situation, into the status of a textbook dealing with Assam's history for the high schools of the region. Haliram's Puranic genealogies had to be decisively broken with, for buranji to be located as the region's particular contribution to the modern discipline of history.

While the title and presentation of Gunabhiram's Assam Buranji signposted his desire for 'local particularity', the narrative itself seemed to indicate another direction – towards an redeployed Indic affiliation. Rather than an emphasis upon ritual categories, Gunabhiram's strategy to further the annexation of Assam into India was to adopt an Aryanist idiom. The starting point for this was the development of a connection between the naming of 'Assam' and Aryan migration into the region.

> Some people say that as this land is bounded by hills it is called a-sama ('uneven'). The area between the Himalayas and Vindhyas is Aryavarta. That is the adi ('original') place of the Aryans in Bharatavarsha. That place was even. So when they came here, they called it A-sam.[25]

Such an analysis must have held particular resonance for his readers, living as they were through Assam becoming the last frontier on India's eastern flanks for a variety of settler groups, ranging from Coolie to Keya, from Babu to Mochi. However, Gunabhiram chose to order the migrations into the region not on occupational, but racial and linguistic lines, further ordered into temporal progression.

> The first are the Arya ('Aryan') or the people who had migrated from Aryavarta and whose languages are based upon Sanskrit. Among them are groups such as the Brahmins, Kalitas and Keot whose language is Assamese which is derived from Sanskrit. The second category are the an-Arya ('non-Aryans') or those who are not descended from the Arya and who have lived or originated in this land from the remote past or came here in that period

[25] Ibid, p.9.

> and who have languages that are independent. The third category are the Mishra jati or those who have originated from a union of the Arya and an-Arya jatis.[26]

What we can discern here was how jati was becoming a device to render alterity, with race and language as its determining markers. First came the Arya/an-Arya dichotomy. Following from that, there was his discovery of linguistic kinship between Sanskrit and Assamese, and other members of that family of Aryan languages. Such a family romance with Indic language cousins provided an ideal opportunity for Gunabhiram to distinguish his caste Hindu brethren from the parbatiya jatis of Assam. Colonial knowledge was simultaneously discovering those jatis as non-Aryans, distinct races of Dravidian and Mongoloid people. With this annexation of race to jati, the category 'parbatiya', too, had shifted a considerable distance, from its fluid renderings in the writings by Haliram and Maniram. The cross-fertilisation of the race migration theories of colonial ethnography with indigenous elite genealogies was serving to annex the term parbatiya to another progeny of Indo-British wisdom - 'tribe' which was being located as an antediluvian strata of Indian society.

It has to be kept in mind that claims of immigration from the core areas of Islam or Hinduism were a well-established device for the construction of a high status identity. These kinds of genealogical fictions possessed an evident affinity to racial ones.[27] The first step here was to deny local origin, with claims that the ancestors of caste Hindus had come from the ritually superior lands to the west. The binary pair Arya/an-Arya was one of several discursive classifications by which the Sanskrit cultural order had constituted itself. But now Gunabhiram and his contemporaries were reworking it through their appropriations of the Orientalist linkage between 'Arya' and 'Aryan'. Sheldon Pollock has pointed out how a monopoly of access to learning, specifically of the paradigmatic form of Sanskrit learning, was a basic component in the construction and reproduction of ideas of inequalities. He sees it as 'a process analogous to colonisation in

---

[26] Ibid, p.10.
[27] Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity*, p.15.

precolonial India'.[28] The genre of Upapuranas and Tantras was a medieval attempt at integrating ritually peripheral lands and cults into a Brahminical domain through locally written texts – the Kalika Purana and the Jogini Tantra in the case of Assam.[29] By the last part of the nineteenth century, the vernacular information order would be familiarly quoting those medieval texts, in the same breath as a Western savant such as Max Mueller, to advance claims of ritual parity for lands and groups which still remained upon the periphery of Aryavarta.[30]

While an Assamiya/Assamese idiom could bond together an Assamese jati, an inherent tension between race and language still disturbed those outlines. This is evident in the Assam Buranji's inability to maintain a rigid dichotomy between Arya and an-Arya. This was inevitable, given the constraint it faced, of writing a history for a region whose territory, nomenclature, mythology and textual traditions were all suffused with an-Arya references. This was where language came to be located within this discourse, as a qualifying term for race. Gunabhiram's analysis characterised an-Arya jatis as lacking kinship with Sanskrit. However, it was implicit in his discussion that these jatis had every possibility of proceeding towards Arya status through affiliating themselves to the Assamese language. The assertion of linguistic kinship with Sanskrit thus served a dual purpose. In the first instance, it allowed for the valorisation of Assamese-as-language, with its monopoly status as the only local idiom which had originated from Sanskrit. But ultimately, the criterion of language also permitted the frontiers of jati to retain a degree of permeability. Despite its anxiety to achieve Aryan status, Gunabhiram's analysis did not go so far as colonial ethnography would in denying the attributes of 'civilisation'. Language beckoned towards a tantalising gap in the defences of 'Aryan' race, through which the linguistically adept an-Arya could venture to gain admission.

---

[28] Sheldon Pollock, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular", The Journal of Asian Studies, 57, (1), February 1988, pp.6-37.
[29] Kunal Chakrabarti, "Texts and Traditions; The Making of the Bengal Puranas," in Champakalakshmi . and S. Gopal ed., *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology: Essays in Honour of Romila Thapar*, Delhi, 1996, pp.55-88.
[30] Durgeswar Barua, "Max Mueller, " Jonaki, Vol. 1, Part 3, 1896.

It needs to be considered that Gunabhiram's Assam Buranji appeared in 1875, just at the moment when the region's intelligentsia had gained some success in its struggle to replace Bengali with the Assamese language. Now the latter would be an officially recognised vernacular in the newly created Chief Commissioner's province. An important strand in the campaign to rescue Assamese from the attribution of dialect was an emphasis upon its pedigree as a daughter of Sanskrit. After the 1874 replacement of Bengali by Assamese for institutional use, official discourse would need to historicise this status, as it did in the 1881 Census which declared that 'The languages of the non-Aryan tribes...do not seem to have contributed to the vocabulary of Assamese (which, like Bengali, rests in the main upon a foundation of Sanskrit) in any greater degree than Welsh has contributed to our modern English'.[31] A revealing analogy was being made here, between the metropole's language/race hierarchies and colonial ones. Indigenous elites were appreciative of such recognition, which their own associational culture, institutionalised in the ABUSS and the Sahitya Sabha, would work to consolidate.

A glimpse of the tortuous, often self-contradictory mode that such a juxtaposition of race theory and elite imaginings of a collective Indic past could take appears in "Assamot Aryar Bosoti" ('The Aryans dwelling in Assam').[32] The central argument in this essay, published in the Jonaki periodical by an obscure publicist called Sonaram Choudhury was that the inhabitants of Assam were located in a direct line of descent from the ancient Aryan race. Sonaram started this 'history' by contextalising it against what he called 'common knowledge' - that the ancient Aryans had initially dwelt in Central Asia. As their numbers grew, they were troubled with attacks by their rivals of the Turanian race. As a result, they began to migrate to the hills of Afghanistan. This assertion allows us a glimpse into how far the assimilation of race science categories had proceeded within the vernacular information order. While Gunabhiram had been familiar with 'Aryan' – Sonaram was able to reinforce that term by alluding to its Other, the 'Turanian'. With Assam's plantations being manned by the people categorised as the descendants of Turanians, a wealth of associations was evoked for Sonaram's

---

[31] *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*, Calcutta, 1883, p.104.
[32] Sonaram Choudhury, "Assamat Aryar Bosoti," Jonaki, Vol. 5, Part 3, 1889.

readers. Such a racially demarcated past provided the setting for this bid to acquire an Aryan identity for the author's compatriots.[33]

On the basis of technology and civilisational attributes, Sonaram plotted three groups within this primeval population in Central Asia - the hunters, the pastoralists and the agriculturists. While the first two groups received praise for being brave and hardy, the third stood out in terms of its propensity for hard work and readiness to undertake any kind of toil. While the hunters were fond of consuming large quantities of meat and alcohol, the agriculturists only used soma juice in moderation and unlike the other groups, had given up their former nomadic way of life.[34] It is not difficult to guess at the resonance that these attributes bore for the readers of the Jonaki. Any of his readers would have immediately seen the reflection of the caste/tribe dichotomies that were being played out in Assam at that moment.

It is noteworthy that apart from its introductory section on the Aryan origins in Central Asia, Sonaram's narrative sharply departed, as we shall see, from the standard Aryanist lore of the period.[35] It is through these departures that he attempted to substantiate the bold claim that his title had foregrounded - this peripheral territory as the final resting-place of the Aryan race. This was introduced through an inventive instance of another staple of nineteenth-century race theory, the 'fantastic' etymologies which tended to accompany quasi-scientific attempts at linguistic analysis.

> According to the rules of vyakarana ('grammar'), the Sanskrit 's' is replaced by 'h' in primeval languages. It can be inferred that this was none other than the ' pronounced as h in the Assamese language of today. Thus, the Sanskrit 'Asur' is none other than the word 'Ahur'.[36]

---

[33] Though the Jonaki published this piece, some editorial unease was evident, expressing itself in a footnote acknowledging that the piece contradicted what most 'prominent scholars' believed, and asking its readers to send in any reactions to engage with his arguments.
[34] Sonaram, "Assamat Aryar Bosoti."
[35] See Ballantyne, *Orientalism*.
[36] Sonaram, "Assamat Aryar Bosoti."

In a mind-boggling leap of logic, this kinship between 'Asura' and 'Ahura' had resulted in Sonaram deducing that Ahura Mazda was the head of the gods (the Asuras) of the agriculturists. Before the Aryans separated into distinct groups on the basis of their living habits, 'Asura' had signified 'divine being'. But as the cultural habits of the different Aryan groups began to differ, so did their gods, and the nomenclature used for them. This was a crucial step in Sonaram's argument, allowing him to establish a direct equation between a 'primeval' Aryan language, Sanskrit, and modern Assamese. It was a bold stroke to use the Assamese pronunciation of 's' as 'h', the most prominent feature distinguishing it from Bengali and other Indic vernaculars, to posit its status as the authentic Aryan tongue. This had the advantage of removing the discussion from the realm of literary achievement, where Assamese could not yet shine, to that of its demotic essence.

From tracing Assamese as Aryan, Sonaram moved on to another identification, between Assamese and Hindu.

> One group among the agriculturists had already, before the war, moved to that territory [of Bharatvarsha]. Since 's' was pronounced as 'h' in their language, as in modern Assamese, they came to be known as Hindus. Later, when the hunters moved in, they too adopted that name. [37]

An interesting departure from Haliram's analysis was that the parbatiya jatis were now included within the ambit of the term 'Hindu'. Thereby, Sonaram managed to bring an-Arya groups into the confines of the Assamese jati he was outlining. 'While these two groups were called Asurik and Douvik, propinquity on the banks of the Sindhu caused them to mix together into one Mishra ('mixed') jati'.[38] This was almost an early version of the assimilationist rhetoric that institutions such as the Asom Sahitya Sabha were to deploy, as part of their strategy of integrating 'tribal' into Assamese, albeit at a subordinate level. In an all-India context, the enumerative logic of colonial politics would soon lend impetus to attempts at incorporating tribal and lower-caste groups into the Hindu fold.[39] It is also noteworthy that Sonaram's equation of Hindu and Assamese meant that he

---

[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] See Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social* Vision; also Jayeeta Sharma, "Work, Temple and Identity: A Balmiki Colony in New Delhi," Unpublished MPhil Dissertation, Delhi, 1994.

was conferring an unprecedented externality of status upon the non-Hindu inhabitant of Assam. Again, it is instructive to compare this with Haliram and Maniram's descriptions, where the 'Muslim' Goriya and Moriya occupied no less a place than any 'Hindu' jati.

The main point in Sonaram's analysis was that the Assamese, among all the Indic people, had the closest ties to Aryan. His key evidence for this was supplied through the linguistic genealogy he created, one that asserted it to be anterior even to Sanskrit. A lengthy account of Aryan migration into Assam provided the setting for this audacious assertion – the derivation of the term 'Hindu' itself from a primeval tongue, the direct ancestor of Assamese.

> The fact that Hindu is derived from Sindhu is widely known. But what is not a matter of common knowledge is what follows from this, that Assamese is a very ancient language as this term comes from it. It is only recently that Assamese has sunk into the mists of obscure darkness.[40]

In a period where the bhaal manuh, the so-called 'respectable' castes of Assam - Brahmins, Daivagnas and Kalitas - were busy manufacturing genealogies of medieval migration from Kanauj, Sonaram could also posit an imaginative leap into an antediluvian past, for Aryan/Assamese. Since the Assamese jati was born simultaneously with its language, it followed that the latter's history was coterminous with the entire history of the jati. Unlike Gunabhiram, Sonaram was not intent on tracing a filial relationship between Sanskrit and Assamese, but rather, posed the two as competitors. 'Gradually, the dominance of Sanskrit was increasing but just as today, Bengali and English have not managed to obliterate the original characteristics of Assamese pronunciation, in the past, Sanskrit itself had to bow its head before that primeval language.'[41]

This then became part of a broader assertion about the character of the Assamese people, who had managed to stay faithful to the achievements of their distant Aryan past.

---

[40] Sonaram, "Asamat Aryar Bosoti."
[41] Ibid.

> Though Sanskrit letters and pronunciation were adopted by the people, the character of the 's' letters did not change. Even today, our readers can see that Assamese has stayed steadfast to its original moorings. Our ancestors, the Asurik Aryans were a gentle, peaceful people who savoured both the charms of nature as well as the beauties of a tenderly soft language. Even though the study of Sanskrit was in vogue, they preferred to blend it with the spoken language. This is how over time, today's Assamese language developed.[42]

This brought Sonaram's peroration to what he saw as a central issue facing the jati, the external dangers around the 'tender body of this young maiden', the Assamese language.[43] Late-nineteenth-century publicists had started adopting a rhetoric of gendered anthropomorphism which simultaneously domesticated and venerated language through the trope of mother. But we find Sonaram preferring to deploy the image of a chaste maiden, reiterating the tropes of 'gentle' and 'tender' he had previously used to characterise the Assamese people. Language was being ascribed these 'feminine' graces, but this, in turn, was juxtaposed with the prospect of its purity being in danger of being sullied. However, Sonaram chose to dwell upon the troubling spectre of language defilement in a brief closing section of his essay. Perhaps this indicates that for the Jonaki's readers, this was an issue that was at the forefront of their minds, something that required only a brief moment of flagging to achieve its force.[44] This type of rhetoric also served as a coded signal that the communion of action that he was conjuring up was essentially a masculine one. While the 'gentle' qualities of the Aryan agriculturists of yore could be transposed onto the Assamese collective self of the present, this presented a risk of being read as a confession of weakness. Therefore, it was sought to be balanced through an emphasis upon the 'imagined' community's capacity for defending feminised virtue.

Sonaram Choudhury resembled other publicists such as Gunabhiram Barua and Padmadhar Gohain Barua in having made his debut into the vernacular information order while still a member of the chatrasamaj. Like them, his subsequent career involved the world of petty government service. While he continued his literary and antiquarian activities, he never became more than a

---

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London, 1995.

minor figure within the vernacular public of Assamese.[45] Nonetheless, his valorisation of Assamese/Aryan flagged certain tropes which found their way into the 'common sense' of the intelligentsia, long after this particular essay was forgotten.[46] As we have seen, Gunabhiram Barua was a much more prominent player, both through his interactions within the vernacular arena and vis-à-vis the colonial state. His Assam Buranji, by virtue of being chosen as a textbook within the colonial educational system, became one of the most influential works of the period, going through a number of editions.[47] The genealogical imaginings of Kanaujiya origin by members of the upwardly mobile Kalita and Daivagna castes, even the affiliations to Gaur or Mecca by elite Assamese Muslims, represented the circulation and dissemination of these racial and historical longings into a much wider realm. Yet, there were a large number of people who felt neglected by this dominant ideology. The next part of the chapter discusses their attempts at creating alternate publics for themselves.

5 (3) Kachari to Bodo: Aborigine, Tribe, Race

Through the later part of the nineteenth century, the interaction of race science with indigenous notions of alterity served to consolidate jati boundaries, now framed as Aryan and non-Aryan. The linguist and ethnographer, Brian Hodgson, from his outpost in the Himalayan foothills, had been one of the pioneers in creating a scientific genealogy which conferred upon Assam's 'oldest and most numerous non-Aryan races...the generic name of Bodo, being the title given to themselves by the most numerous branch'.[48] Hodgson's writings on this Bodo race were part of his wider interest in an aboriginal population of Turanians spreading all over South Asia. Subsequent ethnographers would modify this formulation by bringing in a further distinction between Dravidian and Mongoloid

---

[45] In 1931, Sonaram Choudhury presided over the history session at the Asom Sahitya Sabha's annual conference.

[46] Another essay that the Jonaki published on a related theme was Shri J, "Prasin Bharatot Aryasabhyata," ('The Aryan Civilisation in Ancient India'), Jonaki, Vol. 5, Part 1, 1891.

[47] The British Library possesses editions of Gunabhiram's *Assam Buranji* upto 1911, when it was substantially revised and made up-to-date, keeping in mind Assam's changed political boundaries after the 1905 Partition, by his daughter Swarnalata Ray.

[48] Brian Houghton Hodgson, "On the Origin, Location, Numbers, Creed, Customs, Character and Condition of the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal People with a general description of the climate they dwell in," in *Miscellaneous Essays Relating to Indian Subjects*, 2 volumes, London, 1880, Vol. 1, Section I (first printed in Calcutta, 1847), pp.1-160.

people.[49] But Hodgson's theory about the Bodo race survived, with its notion of its prehistoric movement into Assam yielding to a fissiparous tendency that produced distinct groups of Kachari, Lalung, Rabha, Mech and Garo from an original Bodo race. Hodgson traced an idyllic trajectory for them where

> There are neither servants nor slaves, nor aliens of any kind, and whilst their circumstances tend to perpetuate equality of means, neither their traditions, their religion nor their usages sanction any artificial distinctions of rank...nor is this equality the dead level of abject want. [50]

At the same time, this picture of perfect aboriginal equality had to coexist with the growing body of evidence about the present-day Kachari and Mech's relationship with the Kachari and Koch kings of medieval Assam.[51] This disparity between the past and present was resolved, to some extent, by a theory of conquest. This race of autochthonous rulers was deemed to have been displaced by the entry of the Shan race, which in combination with the 'Aryan migrants from North India', had reduced the Bodo groups to 'unthinking helot condition'.[52] Thus, B.C. Allen disappointedly recorded that 'the ordinary Kachari of Kamrup is an illiterate villager...quite innocent of history, has never heard of the Kachari Raj, and as a source of information of anything prior to the present day is completely useless'.[53]

Quite apart from his past, another attribute rendered the Kachari of overpowering interest to colonial commentators. In contrast to the irredeemable 'savagery' or 'indolence' associated with the rest of Assam's population, the Kachari seemed to afford an ideal subject for the new colonial economy. Even Hodgson had taken a detour from his musings on race and language theories to record that

> The Commissioner of Assam, Major Jenkins, who has by far the best opportunity for observing them, when drawn out of their forest recesses, gives them...a very high character as skilful, laborious cultivators and peaceable, respectable subjects; whilst that this portion of them want neither spirit nor love of enterprise, is sufficiently attested by the fact that

---

[49] George Campbell, "The Ethnology of India," Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Supplementary Number, Vol. 30, Part 2.
[50] Hodgson, ""On the Origin," p.56.
[51] E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, London, 1906.
[52] B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers*, Vol. 4: *Kamrup*, Allahabad, 1905, p.78.
[53] Ibid, p.79.

> when the Darjiling corps was raised two-thirds of the recruits first obtained were Bodo of Assam.[54]

As we have noted, this ascription of suitability for agricultural and military service would provide the main entry point for colonial institutions and ideology to interact with the Kachari. This was to be echoed by Gunabhiram in his Assam Buranji, when he dealt with the present prospects of this an-Arya jati by observing that 'the Kacharis are very hardy. Many of them have gone into the army in recent times'.[55] While the army and police would provide employment to a good number of Kachari, perhaps more than from any other local jati, it was the colonial agro-enterprise of tea that was the first port of call.

In a way, Hodgson's stress upon the Kachari propensity for 'equality' came back to haunt his compatriots seeking to integrate the former into the life of a tea coolie. While large numbers of Kacharis from Darrang and Lakhimpur were initially eager to earn cash through labouring on the Upper Assam plantations in the dry season, they had no desire to stay on as a permanently regimented work force. Soon, the introduction of indentured labour meant that the displaced coolie from Central and Upper India provided more satisfactory labour for this colonial enterprise.[56] This is not to say that the Kachari labourer disappeared. In the 1880s, it was noted that 'they can be sometimes induced by recruiters to go from Lower to Upper Assam to work on road or other contract jobs...They generally return when it is necessary to look after their cultivation, in March or April.'[57] By this time, tea plantations had expanded into the Lower Assam districts of Darrang, Kamrup and Nowgong. Many were in the hands of indigenous planters, and 'Kacharis, Lalungs, Rabhas, Garos and Mikirs' were found working there. But this was as a local labour force, living close to their own villages, usually at 'work for a few months in order to make up some requisite sum of money'.[58]

---

[54] Hodgson, ""On the Origin," p.56.
[55] Gunabhiram, *Assam Buranji*, p.12.
[56] See the previous discussion in Chapter 2 of the dissertation.
[57] Note on the Condition of the People of Assam (in reply to confidential circular issued by Government of India); Note by Rai Gunabhiram Sarma Borua Bahadur, Extra-Assistant Commissioner, Nowgong, Assam Secretariat File 824 R, 1888, ASA.
[58] Ibid.

It is noteworthy that by the turn of the century, as Kachari involvement in the colonial enterprises diminished, officials writing about them tended to veer away from the previous mode of occupational ascription to that of locating their ethnic and religious essence. There is a long and telling gap between Hodgson's pioneering ethnographic account of the 'Koch, Dhimal and Bodo' and the next comprehensive account, by the SPG missionary proselytising among them, Sidney Endle.[59] The dominant view of the 'tribal' was now not so much as a would-be useful member of society but rather, an oscillation between a perspective of redemption from savagery, or of protection for a simple barbarian, depending upon who the observer was. But whether it was missionary or ethnographer, a common theme was how the simple tribal was being 'overpowered' by Hinduism. 'Wherever they are not protected by mountains or by jungles, the non-Aryan residents invariably have yielded, and are yielding, to the overpowering fascination of the Hindu religion and of that higher civilisation to which it is the key'.[60] The census reports on Assam would now classify the Kachari into categories 'according as their designation connotes immunity from, or contact with the influence of the Hindu religion'.[61]

Yet, it was within this general rubric of 'Hinduisation' that we can discern a powerful new current rising, with the first bids made for a Kachari public arena from a world of petty traders, schoolteachers and contractors that had emerged by the turn of the century.[62] In the virtual absence of first-hand accounts, we have to rely on descriptions by colonial officials. In 1914, Friel noted the rapid increase in popularity of what he called 'Hinduisation among the Mech community', but this was of a very different order from what earlier observers had described.[63] Previously, the Baptist William Robinson had recorded that the Kolita Gosains 'have of late been very successful in converting many of the Kacharis, Mikirs and

---

[59] Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis*, London, 1911.
[60] Beverley, H., *Report on the Census of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1872, p.130.
[61] *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*, Calcutta, 1883, p.69.
[62] There are only scattered historical materials here and there which allow us to speculate about these groups. The S.P.G. mission played a significant role in educational and cultural mobilisation, as did missions in other 'tribal' tracts, where the state entrusted the 'civilising' project largely into their hands. An official reported that the Darrang district had fourteen mission schools run by the Rev. Hesselmeyer among its Kachari population, with grants in aid from the government. Cited in C.A. Martin, *General Report on Public Instruction in Assam*, 1876-77, Shillong, 1878, pp.12-3.
[63] B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers*, Supplement to Vol. 3, *Goalpara*, Shillong, 1914, Preface by R. Friel.

other ignorant tribes of mountaineers'.[64] In the District Gazetteers, B.C. Allen described how

> In Lower Assam, Kacharis, when they are converted to Hinduism, are generally incorporated into the ranks of the Koch caste...In Sibsagar...most of them have foresworn pigs, fowls and liquor and live much as do the other humble Hindu castes...of recent years some have taken to calling themselves Ahoms or Chutiyas or occasionally Koch, and there is one family of Kachari priests who actually style themselves Kayastha.[65]

But now, the Brahma movement was contesting this time-honoured model of incorporating groups on the fringes of caste society into its lower reaches. Symbolic of its desire to 'imagine' a new alternative order was a rejection of all the older names that this process had bestowed upon them - Mech, Kachari, Rabha, Koch, Sarania et al. They asserted their new identity as 'Brohmos or the believers in Brahmo, the Supreme Soul.'[66] For the disparate groups that were entering this new identity, this was being achieved through a complex and creative set of appropriations. While the notion of a single overarching Bodo race/language had been legitimised by colonial ethnography, the central principle of Brahma arrived through the teachings of an itinerant Bengali sanyasi, Sibnarayan Paramhansa. The district official, Friel, who provided one of the first accounts of the new community, dismissed it as an Kachari attempt 'to identify themselves as a subcaste of the Hindus.'[67] But, a broader view is necessary to understand this phenomenon for what it was, an innovative appropriation of 'high' cultural elements, 'bricolage' ('an assemblage of heterogeneous cultural materials') at its best,[68] in order to create a new space for an 'ancient Bodo race' in the present.

As we have seen from previous discussions, a variety of devotional idioms had been deployed by groups which were moving, through changes in technology,

---

[64] William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, Calcutta, 1841, p.90.
[65] Allen, Vol. 7, *Sibsagar*, Allahabad, 1906, p.86.
[66] Allen, Supplement, *Goalpara*, Preface by Friel.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, London, 1972, pp.16-17.

habitat and resource-base, towards social respectability in the Assam valley. Heterodox Vaishnavite sects such as the Moamoria had been the typical refuge of such groups. But by the mid-nineteenth-century, it was evident that such sects were gradually tightening their ritual boundaries against those groups seen as subject to disabilities, whether of lifestyle, like the Kachari, or of occupation, like the Dom. Against this, there was a surge in the activities of groups operating in secretive, extreme Tantric modes outside the confines of social and religious conformity. For instance, accounts of the Ratikhowa ('Night Worshippers') sect noted that while it principally comprised the lower castes, it was 'the Hinduised Kacharis and such other Bodo or Hill tribes who are specially fond of these teachings'.[69] It can be speculated that as the dominant forms of Indic religion were becoming less attractive to such peripheral groups, other alternatives were acquiring greater appeal. This could be the Christianity of the Revs. Hesselmeyer and Endle, the Ratikhowa cult, or, most attractively for upwardly mobile sections of the Kacharis, increasingly alive to the importance of 'recovering' the lost status of a Bodo kingdom and race, the new Brahma movement. Such a separate space offered all the advantages of a new elect, of 'purifying' one's newly found Kachari, Mech, Rabha brethren to achieve a wide ranging unnati.

By the time of the 1921 census, it was reported that those 'who wished to abandon the tribal name of Mech described themselves as Bara by caste and language and Brahma by religion'.[70] Colonial categories were now working together with local status systems, enabling a new vocabulary of community to be disseminated through such forums. Thus, the 1931 Census gave wide publicity to the Brahmas by including a passionate account of the movement by a young publicist, Rupnath Brahma.[71] The surname Rupnath was using was itself an indication of the distance the small 'reformed' public he represented had traversed. Of the names they had rejected, Mech had been popular among the Sankritised sections of the Kachari in the territories along the Bengal border. In Assam proper, another name Kachari,

---

[69] Sarat Goswami. "The Night-Worshippers of Assam," Journal of the Assam Research Society, 1929.

[70] Lloyd, G.T., *Census of India, 1921*: Vol. 3: Assam: Part 1, *Report*, Shillong, 1923, Note by Rupnath Brahma, p.194.

[71] Rupnath Brahma was the first Bodo college graduate, and became the first minister from any of the tribal groups of the Assam valley, when he joined the Nabin Chandra Bordoloi Congress ministry in 1938-39 and Muhammad Saadullah's Muslim League ministry in 1940.

was commonly in use. Now, as Rupnath pointed out, they chose to reject these names, as well as the historical baggage that had come to be associated with them. As he emphasised, 'the Bodos had a separate society of their own and never allowed their tribal peculiarities to be merged into the Hindu society'.[72]

We can see, in his account, an attempt to recover, and integrate the disparate groups of the sedentary, Kachari peasants of Upper Assam with the Mech, Cachari and Rabha of Lower Assam, the 'primitives' who had formed the ideal ethnographic and labouring subject for the colonial regime. Allen's Gazetteer had pointed out that 'the broad distinction which in Lower Assam exists between the Kachari and the ordinary lower caste Assamese is hardly to be found in Sibsagar, and the tribe has lost its special tribal characteristics'.[73] What the new Brahma identity was offering to the Sibsagar Kachari was an opportunity to advance further upon his Sankritising journey, but this time, upon his own terms. By joining his cause with that of his less advanced brother, he would be able to recreate that halcyon age when their common ancestors, 'were once the most influential people in the whole of the Brahmaputra valley. They had a distinct state of civilisation of their own'.[74] The writings of the neo-Buranjis and colonial officials on the powerful Kachari and Koch kingdoms of Assam's pre-Ahom past would also be appropriated by this project, as the ubiquitous voice of History proving their claims.

The pioneer in forming this new Brahma community with its quest to re/form the Bodo race was the publicist Kalicharan Brahma (1860-1938). After his conversion to Sibnarayan Paramhansa's creed, with its worship of a monotheistic Brahma through rituals in which all could freely participate, he began organising such rituals himself. In 1906, he held one of the first public ceremonies of this kind, at Banyaguri village in Goalpara, with assistance from village Mandals. A

---

[72] Note by Rupnath, p.194.
[73] Allen, Vol. 7, *Sibsagar*, p.86.
[74] Note by Rupnath, p.194.

Calcutta pundit was present to perform the rituals. Two years later, Kalicharan took the momentous step of performing the priestly role himself.[75]

> No Brahmanical superiority is recognised. The Boros adopting the new form of religion began to call themselves as Brahmas styling their religion as Brahma religion. They recite Gayatries, perform Homa sacrifice and worship God through the sun.[76]

With the replacement of the Brahmin by Guru Kalicharan, the die was cast - he and his followers were now a new community of the elect, sufficient among themselves. Of course, in this lay implicit the idea that the educated vanguard of the Kachari would lead the way for those whose reformation had yet to be achieved. While implicitly rejecting the available models of Assamese Hinduism, Kalicharan was seeking to forge his own independent link to the re-formed Hindu churches that had sprang up all around India, a 'new form of Vedic religion... among the educated classes of the Bodo people'.[77]

The first years of the twentieth century saw a number of meetings and assemblies being held, such as the Bodo Chatra Sanmilan in 1919, and the three Bodo Maha Sanmilans between 1921 and 1929, that Kalicharan Brahma's biographer mentions him as organising.[78] Most of these meetings were mostly presided over by upper-caste patrons, such as Rajani Kanta Bordoloi, a government official posted in the Goalpara district, who wrote extensively about Assam's tribal groups.[79] Other than brief mentions by such elite sympathisers in the Assamese periodicals of the period, hardly any residue survives of the discussions and ideas circulating in this arena. One of the few traces we have of what may well have been a flourishing pamphlet culture[80] is an example from 1927, by a young

---

[75] Debendranath Sarma, *Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma*, Jorhat, 1983. The dates provided in Sarma's text seem fairly dubious to me, given the lack of direct historical texts of the period. This unsatisfactory situation regarding sources has meant that this chapter has perforce depended on such biography-hagiographies and the census reports and gazetteers, despite realising their limitations.

[76] Note by Rupnath, p.194.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Sarma, *Kalicharan.*

[79] See Rajanikanta Bordoloi and Benudhar Rajkhowa's presidential addresses at sessions of the Bodo Chatra Sanmilan published in Abahon issues of the 1920s and 1930s.

[80] In the context of Bengal, Sumit Sarkar has drawn attention to an early twentieth century flood of pamphlet literature from an emerging lower-caste and Muslim literati, the authors of which described themselves as living in obscure villages, often known only by reference to the nearest post office or railway station. Often, they were imbued with an 'improving ethic' about education

Kachari schoolteacher, Jadunath Khakhlari. He published, in pamphlet form, the text of his address to the 'first Assam Kachari Youth Sanmilan'.[81] It is a telling feature of the inchoate nature of this discourse that the ideas and structures around the Kachari jati were still very much in flux. The scanty evidence we have, from the first part of the twentieth century, of a multiplicity of organisations and meetings appears to reflect the workings of small groups operating in isolation for similar ends. Their fluctuating use of the terms Bodo, Kachari, Mech are indicative of the way in which these previously fluid identities were coalescing into a bigger whole.

There were different ideas too, as to the direction the jati should take. Jadunath differed from Kalicharan in wishing to retain the name Kachari for his countrymen. As the title of his text indicated, his emphasis was on recovering their own story, an authentic Kacharir Katha.[82] While he was clearly influenced by colonial theorists as to the existence of a greater Bodo race, he stressed the imperative of reclaiming the historic heritage of Kachari.

> A large number of migratory movements have gone on among the Kachari people over the centuries. Since other sampradays had begun viewing the name Kachari with disdain, about forty or fifty years ago, some of our people have started using other names such as Sonowal instead. But many young men are now realising the futility of such substitutions. If we ourselves see the name Kachari as shameful so will other sampradays.[83]

---

and social reform as well as a focus on agricultural development, which distinguished them from the standard upper caste reformist tract. Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, Delhi, 1997, p.175 and p.258. Even given the much lesser penetration of print and literacy in Assam, I have found substantial traces of such a 'pamphlet culture', with the works by Jadunath Khakhlari and Muhammad Shah, providing examples of this genre. My trawling through the National Library and British Library holdings in Calcutta and London respectively yielded many more examples of this kind, particularly works by obscure lower-caste and Muslim male literati and a few women (from more elite backgrounds). See Abdur Rahman Barua, *Islam*, North Lakhimpur, 1911, Snehlata Bhattacharya, *Aamar Bihu*, Calcutta, 1922 and Beliram Das, *Namasudra Sampraday*, Calcutta, 1933. It is noteworthy that these works, deemed as they are to lack literary or historical merit, have been completely ignored by local literary scholars - otherwise firm believers in salvaging the 'heritage' of the Assamese language. Perhaps this also explains the puzzling fact that most of the private holdings of books within Assam itself (on the infrequent occasions when one can get access to them) ~~which~~ conspicuously lack such obscure works. This process of selection and collection of a canon also provides a telling insight into the middle-class intellectuals controlling it through institutions such as the Asom Sahitya Sabha.

[81] Jadunath Khakhlari, *Kacharir Kotha*, Jorhat, 1927.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid.

It is noteworthy that his narrative fluctuated between characterising the Kachari as a jati, but also as a sampraday, a term that was soon to become very popular for community mobilisation.[84]

Along with religion, caste and history, a new claim, that of numbers, was now being brought into the picture, as shown in the Brahma community's petition to the Simon Commission.[85] 'Considering the strength of their population in the whole province they have a rightful claim to have a separate category as Boro or Bodo.'[86] For Rupnath, as for Jadunath, this prospect of enumeration seemed to make it even more imperative to bring together all the 'fuzzy' identities within the community into one homogenous whole. But, Jadunath was unconvinced by the possibilities of Brahma and instead held out the possibility of reclaiming the contribution that Kachari had historically made to Assamese.

> The onus of action is upon us...Today's separate groups of this large jati are weak in their distinct existences...since it split up, its identity has been lost and it has been ashamed of itself...that Kachari language from whose roots sprang the present Assamese language, whose king was the patron of the Mahapurusiya religion and the Assamese religious books in its fledgling days, who brought in Brahmins and Gosains into Assam to

---

[84] In traditional texts such as the *Gryha Srauta Sutras* the word 'sampraday' denoted a 'doctrine' or 'belief'. Later, it came to mean the religious teachings of any sect. In the early-nineteenth century, both 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' were seen as members of a 'dharma' rather than of a 'sampraday'. In early-twentieth century Bengal, 'sampraday' was more generally in use to denote 'community', 'sect' or 'tradition', but gradually, the religious dimension was elbowing out the others, as Hinduism and Islam came to be viewed as sampradays. In Assam, the use of this term seems to have been much slower, as jati continued to be the most prominent term used by most of the publicists I have considered. The only other context where I have found the word 'samapraday' being used in Assam in the 1920s is in the speeches delivered at the Assam Muslim Chatra Sanmilan addresses, reproduced in the volumes of the Sadhana, an 'Assamese Muslim' periodical, published between 1922 and 1926 from Gauhati. But from the 1930s, it comes into general usage, usually to denote a religious community, on the model of other parts of India. However, almost certainly influenced by Bengali contemporaries, Beliram Das published his *Namasudra Sampraday* in 1933. I am indebted for this discussion of the term to Sulagna Roy, "Communal Conflict in Bengal, 1930-47," Unpublished Dissertation, Cambridge, 1999.

[85] Memorandum submitted by Government of Assam, *Report of Indian Statutory Commission, 1928-9*, Vol. 14, Government of India, 1930, p.30. It further noted that 'the following castes or tribes sought nomination to the Council - the Khasis; the Kacharis (about 250,000); the Marwaris (about 16000. They are not British subjects but were enfranchised in 1923. The request was not granted as they take little part in public activity); the Ahoms (over 200,000); the Bodos of Goalpara (some 80,000); the Mahisyas (about 100,000); the Maharas (some 200); the Nepalis (some 104,000); the Koch (some 225,000). Of the above, only the Ahom have received nomination.' It is noteworthy that the Kachari, Koch and Bodos were still being referred to as distinct categories.

[86] Note by Rupnath, p.194.

> improve the condition of the country, and brought in artisans from Orissa, that Kachari jati has lost its place somewhere.[87]

That loss, as every educated Kachari was beginning to be aware, meant that of the history of the Kachari and Koch kings of medieval Assam. Indeed, as an Ahom publicist lamented on their behalf, 'the family of the Koch Bihar Raja, though unfortunately for us now [are] regarded as part of Bengal and they call themselves Bengalis'.[88] In the vacuum created by the absence of a history, both indigenous and colonial wisdom had classified them as 'hill tribes'. Virtually alone among the inhabitants of the Assam Valley, the Kachari had been subject to the colonial ethnographers' photographic representations of aborigines.[89] The newly established frontier regulations for hill tribes had not been applied to them, but the new Kachari public saw it as a compelling necessity to separate itself even further from such 'savage' groups as the Naga. This was to be done by arriving at the new category of 'plains tribe' or 'Mongolia people', in alliance with other similarly placed groups such as the Miri and the Mikir, even, briefly, the Ahom.[90] Unlike other parts of India, the term 'Adivasi' never became entrenched at the expense of the word 'tribal'. Indeed, 'Adivasi' groups such as the Santals who migrated here from other parts of India were to face tremendous hostility from the 'authentic tribals' of Northeast India. Over the next few decades, 'Brahma' gradually went out of favour, as not distinctive enough from 'Hindu' It was the 'ancient' Baithou worship, part of the practices that the colonial census had

---

[87] Jadunath, *Kacharir Kotha*.

[88] Hiteswar Barbarua, "Kachari Bhatrisokol Aru Cachar Jila," ('Our Kachari Brothers and the District of Cachar'), Abahon, Vol. 4, 1930. This essay gives an interesting insight into how a contemporary Ahom ideologue regarded the Bodo 'tribe'. At this point, as we shall see, the Ahoms, particularly their aristocratic representatives such as Barbarua, had not come around to viewing themselves as fellow 'Mongoloids' (as they would from the 1940s) but were engaged in emphasising their 'Kshatriya' attributes as a warrior jati. The Cooch Behar royal family had made the transition to Kshatriya status much more successfully, and were prominent among the zamindari dynasties of Bengal, with their 'Assamese' origin wistfully recollected only by Assam's publicists. However, we do see Hem Chandra Goswami and other literati achieving some limited amount of patronage from the Cooch Behar Raja in this period. See Chapter 3 of the dissertation.

[89] See Edward Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of India*, Calcutta, 1872; J.W. Kaye and J. Forbes Watson ed., *People of India*, London, 1868 and Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis*, London, 1911.

[90] These are the names which were used in official discourse. The Mikir, now known as the Karbi, were another group that made a transition from 'hill' to 'plains' tribe status. See Charles Lyall, *The Mikirs, from the Papers of the Late Edward Stack*, London, 1908. The Miri are now known as the Mishing – it is perhaps the greater degree of 'Hinduisation' among them in the nineteenth century which accounts for their virtual absence in the discussions of colonial ethnography.

dismissed as 'animist', that a late-twentieth century Bodo bid for nation would seek to recover. Instead of the Assamese language that the first Bodo publicists had used, the Bodo tongue that the Rev. Endle had rendered into writing would be the language for this nationalism, institutionalised through the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, with strong sentiments as to the script it should affiliate itself to, whether Assamese, Roman or Nagri.[91]

5 (4) Dom, Nadiyal, Kaivarta: A Race Towards Caste

A number of regional studies have drawn attention to the ways in which a host of lower-caste groups in South Asia were seeking out opportunities for mobility within the colonial order which precolonial polities had denied them.[92] The 1901 census report for Assam described as a particularly marked tendency among Hindu castes, a 'tendency to level upwards, and the refusal of those at the bottom of the social scale to acquiesce in the humble positions assigned to them'.[93] It noted that this phenomenon was characteristic of almost all groups, encouraged by the relatively loose social hierarchies which had characterised this 'imperfectly Sanskritised' region.

> In the Assam Valley the Kayasthas and Kalitas are putting forward claims to take precedence of the Ganaks. The Kalita who has reached a position where it is no longer necessary for him to drive the plough calls himself a Kayastha, the Dom is no longer contented with the name Nadiyal and wishes to be called a Jaliya Kaibarta; and the Kewat, in fear of being compounded with the Nadiyal styles himself a Mahisya Vaisya. The Hari returns himself as Brittial Baniya and denies all connection with the sweeper caste; the Jugi poses as one of the twice-born, and even the upper class of the Ahoms, as to whose racial affinities there can be no doubt, wish to be called Daityakul Kshatriyas.[94]

---

[91] A similar process can be seen at work among the Khasi of the erstwhile Khasi Hills district, now the state of Meghalaya. From the middle of the twentieth century, the nativist 'Seng Khasi' movement has been engaged in a 'recovery' of an ancient Khasi religion and culture, in opposition to the strongly entrenched Khasi Christian community. Language and script become associated with particular kinds of political and cultural dominance. Due to the 'big brother' attitude of the Assamese intelligentsia, Hindi and Nagri are seen as relatively less oppressive by the 'tribal' communities of present-day Northeast India. They are also used to contest the Romanised transliteration of 'tribal' languages which missionaries had introduced in the colonial period.

[92] See Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, Bandhopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*; Jurgensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision* and Nandini Gooptu, "Caste, Deprivation and Politics: the Untouchables in U.P. towns in the early twentieth century," in Peter Robb ed., *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour*," Delhi, 1994, pp.277-98.

[93] B.C. Allen, *Census of India, 1901*: Vol. 4: Assam: Part 1, *Report*, Shillong, 1902, p.117.

[94] Ibid.

In many cases, the new political economy around colonialism was providing the material base for such claims, from Shanar to Nadar in Kerala, Goala to Yadav in Bihar, and from Dom to Kaivarta in Assam.[95] Nonetheless, there is evidence of increased social mobility for some of these groups, already apparent by the eighteenth century. The fishing groups broadly grouped under the label Dom in Assam had then started on a career of social and economic mobility, in which the state engaged as an interlocutor in various forms. When visible markers of inferiority were imposed upon the Dom by the last Ahom kings in the form of a fish tattoo, this was an indicator not of his fixed and lowly position, but rather, of a social flux which the hardening hierarchies of a dissolving local regime were attempting to regulate. In 1829, Haliram Dhekial Phukan's account of Assam had acknowledged 'the admirable qualities that Doms possessed, despite their low ritual status'. He stressed the prosperity that many had come to enjoy due to 'their involvement in trade, their literate skills, and their devotion to Vaishnavite tenets'.[96] Such attributes, acquired by Doms before the British entered Assam, were the very ones that they would use to assert a higher place in the new colonial milieu. A dual strategy of legitimation would be used, partly deploying state institutions such as the census, and partly, by affiliating themselves to the emergent public tropes of 'voluntary association' and 'social uplift'.

Again, as in the case of the Kachari, for such a group as the Dom, possessing little of the 'symbolic capital' enjoyed by higher castes, we need to tap colonial sources for insights into their changing moral economy. The administrator John Butler observed 'Assam is so intersected by rivers, that the Assamese prefer moving about in their little canoes to travelling by land'.[97] This ecology had bestowed tremendous importance upon 'the Dooms or Nudeals (watermen)', especially in the period before steamers and railways had made an appearance. In later years, petitions from caste-based organisations such as the Kaibarta Jatiya Hitkari Sabha and the All Assam Kaibarta Sanmilan would harp upon this vital role undertaken

---

[95] See the excellent pioneering studies of such movements in Rajni Kothari ed., *Caste in Indian Society*, New Delhi, 1970.
[96] Haliram, *Assam*, p.88.
[97] John Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam during a Residence of Fourteen Years*, London, 1855, p.220.

by its members in the early years of the British regime.[98] The Chief Commissioner was reminded that 'when British forces first came to occupy Assam, it was mainly Kaibarta boatmen who were engaged to propel the country boats carrying them...and during [the] Abor and Manipur expeditions, hundreds of Kaibarta boatmen performed one of the most arduous work[s] that was ever done by any civil community for [the] British government in Assam'.[99] Such petitions revealed that the people whom Haliram and Butler had known as Dom now aspired to being called Kaibarta. This new name would not only bring together the different fishing and boating groups loosely engaged in transactions around the waterborne economy, but would enable them, it was hoped, to transcend the lowly associations of the old. In the 1840s, Butler had noted that 'the dooms or fishermen of the present day...insist on being called nuddeals, or watermen, which title in their estimation is more honourable'.[100] But as late as 1872, colonial ethnography still saw fit to class them as Dom, classified along with 'Chandal, Ahoms, Chutiyas, Koch' as 'semi-Hinduised Aboriginals', external to Hindu caste society and Aryan status.[101]

At one level, this non-Aryan status did not preclude attribution of past glories to the Assamese Dom, in the manner of the Kachari. Thus, B.C. Allen speculated that 'the Nadiyals are probably descended from the aboriginal race of Doms, the ruins of whose forts are still to be seen in India'.[102] But, as far as the Kaivarta were concerned, it was far more important for them ~~Kaivarta~~ that colonial institutions such as the census should help in acquiring the ritual respectability that should accompany their growing material success. To this end, they sought to harness the social changes wrought by the plantations and the coolies they had brought into the landscape of Assam. Their petitions to the state stressed the risk they ran of being confounded with that 'degraded' and dirty Bengali coolie, the

---

[98] For the phenomenon of the caste sabha see Kothari, *Caste in Indian Society*; Sibsankar Mukherjee, "The Social Role of a Caste Association", Indian Economic and Social History Review, (1), March 1984, pp.89-100 and Lucy Carroll, "Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations," in The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 37, (2), February 1978, pp.233-50.
[99] Memorial from the Kaibarta Jatiya Hitkari Sabha, Revenue Proceedings 'B', Nos. 370-6, June 1908, ASA.
[100] Butler, *Travels in Assam*, p.224.
[101] Beverley, *Census etc 1872*, p.201.
[102] Allen, Vol. 8, *Lakhimpur*, Calcutta, 1905, p.120.

'remover of filth and dead bodies' that was the 'Dom' among the new migrants. Allen's identification of the Dom caste with an autochthonous race of rulers, despite its non-Aryan connotations, seems in this light, a concession to Kaivarta sentiments on this issue. He stressed that the Assam group were 'cleanly in their persons and particular in their observances of the Hindu religion and account for the objectionable expression 'Dom' by saying that they were the last of the Assamese to be converted from Buddhism'[103]. In common with other lower-caste groups, the erstwhile Doms of Assam could cloak contemporary mobility by elaborating upon their 'fall' from past glory and seeking 'regeneration' in the present, to advance a step further, from Nadiyal to Kaivarta.

These attempts to attain public recognition as Kaivarta were located against a commercial economy emerging within a social landscape of strengthening ritual boundaries. Allen had noted that while all castes caught fish for their own consumption, it was only Doms or Nadiyals, Charals or Namasudras and the animistic tribes of Bodo origin who would acknowledge that they were selling it.[104] The respectable Kaibarta label that Doms/Nadiyal wished to appropriate was associated with the Jaliya Kaibarta, a section of the Keot ('a cultivator caste'), whose respectability stemmed from their being ranked immediately after the Brahmins and the Kalita in the ritual hierarchy of Assam. Despite sustained efforts, the 1901 census refused to re-classify the Dom/Nadiyal as Kaibarta. It was a differential participation in the trading of fish which differentiated the Dom/Nadiyal from his superior whose name he coveted. Thus,

> Kaibartas are unquestionably a different caste though their manners and customs do not differ materially from those of the Assamese Nadiyals, except in one particular. The Kaibartas decline to use the ghokata net and in theory only sell their fish on the river's bank, within a paddle's throw of the boat, whereas the Nadiyals regularly take their catch to market. [105]

What this reveals is how the previously fluid boundaries of the Keot jati had allowed a materially successful fishing group to enter its portals with the name of Jalia ('waterborne') Kaibarta to distinguish them from the Halia ('cultivating')

---

[103] Ibid.
[104] Allen, Vol. 4, *Kamrup*, p.172.
[105] Allen, Vol. 7, *Sibsagar*, p.120.

section of the jati. The growing centrality of a food market had speeded up this process, allowing ever larger numbers of Doms to attain the economic mobility upon which this quest for Kaibarta status was premised.[106] In the Lakhimpur district, the right of fishing was annually auctioned, fetching between 20 and 30,000 rupees a year, to a mahaldar who was usually 'a Nadiyal of local influence'.[107] While most fishing groups still sold fish on a daily basis in local areas, there had come to be 'a considerable export of fish from the Brahmaputra...to the large markets near the tea gardens'.[108] In Darrang, whose many plantations facilitated this trade, growing prosperity had differentiated the Dom into Muchi (traders), Kheoli (wholesale sellers) and Machua (retail sellers).[109] In the 1911 census, we finally see a disjuncture between the old name of Dom and the category of Nadiyal, listed in its caste glossary as 'a Brahmaputra valley caste...they are now shown separately from Doms, who include foreigners'.[110] While the Dom category was abandoned to 'the corpse remover of Bengal', the government was still unwilling to bestow the name of Kaibarta upon the Nadiyal, since it was attached to another community. However, by the time the next decennial census reported its findings, this situation had been rectified by the 'respectable' Keots themselves abandoning the name of Kaibarta. The 1921 census declared that while Kaibartas were shown in 1911 under three sub-heads: Kaibarta, Chasi Kaibarta, Jalia and simple Kaibarta, those had now been tabulated as entirely different castes. 'Those who entered themselves as Kaibarta only have increased more than fourfold from the 1911 total...the greater part represents Nadiyals and Doms of the Brahmaputra valley and Jalia Kaibartas of Sylhet'.[111] The Keots, erstwhile Jalia Kaivarta, now sought to call themselves Mahishya

---

[106] Though it must be kept in mind, that once again, it is the 'successful' sections of a community whose traces we find in historical records. In the early decades of the twentieth century, a planter A.R. Ramsden observed that 'Along the banks of the Brahmaputra are dotted, at considerable intervals, small collections of raised huts, occupied by a fishing people called the Dhooms. These and another distinct people, the Kachari, live entirely by their fishing, and are to be seen plying their trade with net and line at all hours of the day.' A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle*, London, 1944, pp.107-8.

[107] Allen, Vol. 8, *Lakhimpur*, pp.210-1.

[108] Allen, Vol. 5, *Darrang*, Allahabad, 1905, p.93.

[109] Ibid.

[110] J. McSwiney, *Census of India, 1911*: Vol. 3: Assam: Part 1, *Report*, Shillong, 1912, p.135.

[111] Lloyd, *Census etc 1921*, p.145.

Vaisya, the adoption of Vaisya probably due to their domination of the lucrative wholesale fish economy.[112]

Nonetheless, even before receiving official recognition, a large population of fishing castes had mustered enough confidence to present themselves as Kaivartas in public. One manifestation of their quest for social respectability was their changed attitude to women's work. The *pohari* ('female petty trader') had been a long established figure in Assamese society. Indeed, this can be seen as a social trait linking this entire belt to Southeast Asian peasant economies, rather than to the Indic ones. Observers noted that the commonest sight in the Assamese countryside was women transplanting paddy, or 'a long line of women fishing in a bil'.[113] In addition, the women of the Dom caste would 'collect whelk shells, and make the lime which is so largely eaten with betel-nut and pan.'[114] This lime, along with fish and other petty articles, comprised some of the goods offered for sale at the local haats by the pohari of the fishing castes. But, by the 1920s, the movement to improve Nadiyal status had begun to emphasise the opprobrium attached to women selling fish in public markets, and demanded that Nadiyals stop their women from even going to the bazaars.[115]

In the cultural representations constituting such public arenas, we find an increasing tendency to portray women's work as marginal to the reproduction of the household economy. In examining the public sphere as 'the structured setting where cultural or ideological contest or negotiation among a variety of publics takes place', it is clear that an essential ingredient here was the construction of new categories of 'public man' and 'virtue', via a series of gendered oppositions.[116] With respectability becoming the exclusive attribute of households which were able to withdraw the labour of women, the socially mobile Dom/Nadiyal/Kaivarta took a lead in erasing the disconcerting figure of the

---

[112] In Bengal, Kaibartas in the mid-nineteenth century had mostly been fishermen and agriculturists of intermediate-caste status in Southwestern Bengal. Over the next few decades, the cultivators among them (Hele as against the Jele Kaibarta) acquired the more prestigious name of Mahisya through a major caste movement. Swami Saradananda, *Vol. 2, Sadhakbhava*, Calcutta 1982, pp.70-5, cited by Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, p.226, f.n.32.
[113] Note on the Condition of the People of Assam, 1888, ASA.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Lloyd, *Census etc 1921*, p.178.
[116] Eley, "Nations, Publics and Political Cultures."

pohari. This received added urgency in a local context where the growing discourse of the woman worker as sexually promiscuous seemed to be explicitly figured by the female coolie on the tea garden.[117] In place of the female active in fishing or trading, an acceptable social model was found within the confines of Vaishnavite devotionalism, with a folk story about a virtuous fishwife Radhika's triumphant encounter with the seer Sankardeb transmuted into a site for Sati Radhika Utsav, an annual public commemoration of the new jati.[118]

5 (5) Ahom: Tribe, Race, History

This chapter has previously examined some aspects of the Kaivarta journey from 'aboriginal Dom tribe' to that of a respectable Hindu caste. The Kachari were making a similar bid to construct a public arena where previously discrete local groups could come together as a 'Bodo' jati, appropriating the findings of ethnology and history to reorder their previous ascription of 'parbatiya' into a new identity of 'historic plains tribe'. The chapter has explored how these groups were manoeuvring through the colonial apparatus of print, enumeration and electoral representation to accumulate political and cultural capital. The larger context of these developments needs to be kept in view, where Assam, one of the last frontiers for 'Aryan civilisation', was being transformed by a rapid and belatedly intense surge of 'Sanskritising' activity. One consequence was the proliferation of attempts to stratify and consolidate ritual boundaries. This was occurring at the same moment when discrete jatis were assembling as components of broader identities affiliating to region and nation. This section locates such a process by exploring another community living in Assam, the Ahom. By examining a set of colonial and indigenous representations of the Ahom, it attempts to outline their complicated and changing relationship with notions of 'caste' and 'tribe', 'history' and politics.

---

[117] Such an image of the female coolie can be seen in one of the folk songs collected by Prafulladatta Goswami, *Bihu Songs of Assam*, Guwahati, 1988, p.117. The verse goes as follows: 'The Sahibs make Mems of coolie girls, with cigars on their lips.'

[118] The first printed account of the virtuous fishwife Radhika's encounter with Sankardeb where she proved her unsullied chastity over other Brahmin and Kalita women was in U.C. Lekharu, *Phakara*, Barpeta, 1911, as mentioned by Prafulladatta Goswami in his *Ballads and Tales from Assam*, Guwahati, 1960. I have not been able to locate Lekharu's account. However, a later, fuller account is there in Gokul Pathak, *Sati Radhika*, Huwli, 1957, probably a reprint of a 1930s text. By the 1920s, annual celebrations of a Sati Radhika Utsav had been instituted by the numerous Kaivarta Sanmilans established in Assam. Reports of these are available in the Assamiya newspaper issues of the period.

In precolonial Assam, the Tai people who came to be known as Ahom had proved to be somewhat tardy in acquiring the ideology and lived practices of the Indic ruling order. This meant that they remained relatively more independent of the Brahminical ranking system, in comparison to most other ruling lineages of the subcontinent. Previous discussions of the buranji genre have shown how the depictions of 'Ahom' clustered around their affiliation to a mythic homeland, and their warrior image as conquerors of Assam's territory and jatis. By the early-twentieth century, these were the main two elements that a nascent Ahom 'public' would seek to build upon, in its quest for identity, both as a jati in itself and as an important constituent of a modern Assamese jati-as-nation.

British administrative lore had an ambiguous view of the Ahom, tending to steer an uneasy course between regarding them as 'a governing nation' who comprised the most numerous class of inhabitants in eastern Assam[119] to apostrophising them as tyrannical conquerors from the Shan lands whose rule the inhabitants of Assam had gladly renounced in favour of the British.[120] Even as colonial knowledge practices shifted from political into ethnographic mode, their ideas about the Ahom retained something of the earlier ambivalence. For a start, this was a group poised indeterminately at the interstice between caste and tribe, given that its prestige as a ruling class had to be balanced against a low ritual ranking and a proclivity for 'non-Hindu' customs. The official attitude can also be seen as symptomatic of the inability of a majority of the Ahom dangariyas to reconcile to their loss of power and pelf. The uncertainty about where the Ahom stood, either as a people or as a culture, was a reflection of the changed power relations where the scribal caste gentry was successfully managing the transition to British rule in a way that their former superiors, the Ahom warrior aristocrats had not. The memoir written by the Daivagna official, Harakanta Barua Sadar Amin, lends credence to such a picture with his depiction of the princely household's inability to comprehend a new world of timekeeping, fixed incomes and written records.[121]

---

[119] Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, London, 1820 (reprint Guwahati, 1963), p.55.
[120] Foreign Secret Consultations, No. 27, 5 April, 1825; Agent on Northeast Frontier to Secretary to the Government of India, Fort William, NAI.
[121] See Harakanta Barua, *Sadar Aminor Atmajivani*, Guwahati, 1930.

This fits in with the constant complaints from the East India Company's local representatives that efforts to employ the old nobility were coming to naught, and that all they could do for them was to forward their petitions to restore their 'slave' servants and to increase their pensions, onto headquarters at Calcutta.[122]

But a picture of utter and complete dislocation for the Ahom upper classes should not be taken too far. Given the scarcity of agricultural labour, the loss of 'slaves' did bring considerable difficulty in cultivating their estates, but this affected upper caste households and satra lords, as well as upper class Ahom families, and most did manage to recoup their resources. What does seem to be the case is that, like the Muslim aristocracy of North India, the Ahom community of Upper Assam lagged behind the scribal castes of Brahmin, Daivagna and Kalita in moving into the new educational structures. A rare exception to this was Padmadhar Gohain Barua (1871-1964), the sole Ahom name among the first 'Jonaki' generation of publicists. It is from his career that we can discern the tangled nodes of the emergent Ahom and Assamese identities, and the public arenas that were being constructed.

Padmadhar's father, Ghinaram Gohain Barua (c.1823-98?) had started off in a petty government post with the salary of four rupees. When he reached the post of mouzadar, this gave his household a comfortable living, supplemented as it was by elephant trapping, in their home district of North Lakhimpur.[123] Padmadhar was sent to live with relatives while attending high school in the nearest town, Sibsagar. This equipped him to accompany his contemporaries into the educational networks of Calcutta, and as a corollary, the associational culture of the Assamese chatrasamaj. His autobiography provides a vivid picture of his experiences in the ABUSS, how he wrote the 'first Assamese novel', Lahari, in a fortnight, after a heated discussion among his fellow students in the 'Assamese mess' about the poverty of their literature led to a drawing of lots to accomplish that task.[124] Presciently, considering the future direction of his career, this was a historical work, located in Ahom times. But on the whole, Padmanath's

---

[122] See Mills, *Report*, pp.637-43.
[123] Padmanath Gohain Barua, *Mor Sowarani*, Guwahati, 1968, p.192
[124] Ibid, p.33.

imagination, in this Calcutta phase, revolved around the consolidation of a terrain for Assamese.

It was after his return to Assam that Padmadhar began to articulate those imaginings into a new mode of 'recovery' and 'regeneration' – one that involved the conjoining of 'Ahom' to 'Assamese'. He had lived through his high school days in Sibsagar, the site of the Ahom capital of Rangpur, but it was only now when he re-entered it that he was struck by the atmosphere surrounding its historic buildings, redolent of 'purani kirti, purani gaurab' ('past glory and splendour').[125] His autobiography portrayed him as increasingly obsessed with the necessity of achieving 'jatiyo unnati' ('national progress'), even while beginning his adult life as a teacher, and later, a professional litterateur and politician.[126] From this point on, Padmanath's narrative came to give centrestage to his self-professed mission to reinvigorate 'Ahom gyati' and 'Assamiya jati'.[127] The double character of this agenda was conveyed through this crucial semantic disjuncture, reserving 'gyati' with its resonances of kinship for Ahom, and 'jati' for Assamese, a fictive community of friends and sympathisers. In this formulation, we see jati-as-nation taking its first crucial steps, away from the narrower recesses of jati-as-caste that had effectively limited itself to an actual, or potential community of kith and kin.

It is instructive to compare Padmanath's narrative with a personal testimony of an earlier period, the Atmajivani of Harakanta. A previous discussion has noted how the themes of friendship and associational activity structure Padmanath's life, in contrast to Harakanta's, where both of those are virtually absent. However, what is particularly significant is how the personal dimension of their lives appears in these texts. In contrast to Harakanta, whose interior life could be gauged by the reader only in an indirect manner, through the descriptions of his interactions with others, Padmanath's narrative did foreground a domain of affect. But, in a notable departure from the first part of his text which dwelt in nostalgic detail upon his

---

[125] Ibid, p.44.
[126] It should be noted that Padmanath first published his reminiscences in serial form in the Abahon in the 1930s. It was later published in book form, a retrospective look at his career, with all the omissions and stresses that is intrinsic to an autobiography.
[127] Padmanath, *Mor Soworoni*, p.46

childhood and adolescence, the later part was almost exclusively dedicated to the mission of gyati and jati amelioration. Apart from a brief account of his romantic yearnings, the rest of Padmanath's adult life, as derived from this narrative, was directed towards those twin objectives.

In order to further the cause of jati, Padmanath was organising local branches of the Calcutta ABUSS in Upper Assam, and seeking to extend the reach of the Assam Association.[128] At the same time, he was initiating discussions with an older generation of notables of his gyati, travelling by elephant into the remote recesses of Ahom villages to convince their inhabitants of the need to recover past glory. The first public meeting of an Ahom Sabha was organised in 1893 at Sibsagar, and subsequently, its branches were established all over Upper Assam. The first activity that the new organisation took up was an anti-opium crusade, anticipating its adoption as the main plank of the official version of Gandhian nationalism in Assam.[129] As previous discussions have shown, opium was a unifying issue that would serve as a rallying cry for the region's middle classes to reform their indolent and intemperate countrymen.[130] By 1910, the Ahom Sabha had been renamed the Ahom Association. This was a momentous shift, from Sabha to Association, placing the renamed organisation as a contender in the same league as the Assam Association and the Indian Association, an organisation mooting a broad political project within the representational space of British India. An ambitious political bid was mooted by the new Association, to recover the position that the Ahom community had lost, first to the British, and then to the caste Hindus. A partial victory seemed to have been achieved, when Padmanath was nominated to the Legislative Council as the Ahom representative.[131] However, as we shall see, the mannered, retrospective nature of Padmanath's

---

[128] The Assam Association was formed in 1903, partly as a counter to the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha, which had been dominated by the landholders of Upper Assam, men such as Jagannath Barua. It first annual convention was held at Dibrugarh in 1905. It consciously positioned itself as seeking a commonality of interests between Assamese and Bengalis, as well as between Hindus and Muslims, living in Assam. To this end, its proceedings were conducted in English. But a difference in rhetoric can be traced from the 1911 session, presided over by Padmanath Barua, when the Association instituted the Assamese language as its official vernacular.

[129] Padmanath, *Mor Soworoni*, pp.46-50.

[130] See the previous discussions in Chapters 2 and 3 of the dissertation.

[131] Padmanath, *Mor Soworoni*, p.244-8.

testimony served to conceal the deep cleavages within the gyati – the bitterly contested readings of self and community that Ahom was inspiring.

For some time, a movement had been underway to affiliate Ahom to high caste ranking – mainly through the efforts of a Kshatriya Association whose General Secretary was Padmovar Gohain Naiboisa Phukan of Sibsagar.[132] It was in his name that the Chief Commissioner of Assam received a petition in 1902, demanding that the census should recognise Ahoms as Kshatriyas.[133] Its branches were reported from all over the Assam valley, and were responsible for five more petitions in the same year.[134] However, the 1911 census paid no heed to this campaign, and was taken to illustrate the futility of this course of action. But the Ahom began to blame the state's lack of response upon the influence exerted upon it by high caste prejudice. In 1915, Ahom aspirations to ritual mobility received a frontal attack from a text called Ripunjay Smriti, written by an orthodox Gosain, Tirthanath Goswami, which described Ahoms as Antaryja ('outcastes'), and advocated penances for Hindus who associated with them.[135] A few years later, the Bengali Brahmin scholar Padmanath Vidyavinod provoked similar outrage when he described the Ahom students in his Sanskrit class at Cotton College as Mlechhas.[136]

In the furore created by Tirthanath's book, some leaders of the Ahom Association issued calls for its members to give up Hinduism and return to the rituals of their forefathers. From the 1920s, Ahom attempts to claim high caste status from the

---

[132] While Padmanath refers to Padmavar Gohain as a prominent Ahom leader, he makes no mention of his role in the Kshatriya project. It is difficult to say whether this was because Padmanath saw him as a rival whose role was to be minimised, or whether that at a later period, when the Kshatriya project had waned away, it was deemed better to brush it under the carpet.

[133] Petition to the Chief Commissioner, 29 November, 1902; Cited by Bimal J. Dev and Dilip Lahiri, *Cosmogony of Caste and Social Mobility in Assam*, Delhi, 1984. I was unable to locate the original, and so cannot say whether it was buttressed by affidavits (usually with the entire paraphernalia of stamped paper and so on) from obliging Gosains, as with Kaivarta and Daivagna petitions expressing similar sentiments.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Sayeeda Yasmin Saikia, "A Name Without a People: Searching to be Tai-Ahom in Modern India," Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Wisconsin, 1999, p.209. I have come across advertisements for other books published by Tirthanath Goswami, which seem to indicate that he was an orthodox Hindu 'revivalist', with extremely conservative views on caste and gender issues. However, to place this in perspective, it should be noted that the Gosain who was then most in the public eye was the Gandhian Satradhikar of Garamur, Pitambar Dev Goswami, who publicly opposed such sentiments and took a leading role in initiating lower-caste disciples.

[136] This incident was recalled by various alumni of Cotton College, Guwahati.

state were gradually being overshadowed by their demands for communal representation and 'Racial minority' status. As the Bodo were finding, a separate sphere seemed to promise respectability, and an established religious community provided an acceptable mode of interacting with state institutions. At the same time, a section among the Ahoms began to call for a broad-based unity among Mongoloid communities of Assam, where they hoped to play a leading role as the 'foremost tribal race of Assam'.[137] The existing mythology of migration could be harnessed to this larger agenda, as one of its ideologues, Ghanakanta Gohain devised Ahom printing blocks, reportedly with the help of a Bhikhu from Burma, in an attempt to bypass the 'Aryan language' of Assamese.[138] Attempts to forge links with other Shan people in the regions eastwards of Assam would emerge as the most prominent item in the Tai-Ahom identity to which post-colonial India would give rise. In the last years of British rule, while the term Tai itself had not yet come into vogue, Ahom attempts to establish contact with a Burmese Buddhist Goodwill Mission in 1948 and with the Kachin reveal how the conflation of Aryan and Indic was influencing communities of 'non-Aryans' to aspire beyond the political frontiers of India, to 'restore' their connections with the 'Mongoloid' inhabitants of surrounding borderlands.[139] In an ironic twist, the larger community of Tai people, ranging across Assam, Burma and China, that the American Baptist missionaries had aspired to find, was now being visualised, almost a century later, by these inhabitants of Upper Assam.[140]

---

[137] In 1935, a newspaper report from Dibrugarh reported that the Ahom Conference had urged for non-cooperation with Brahmin and Goswami priests and for the 'formation of a big Mongolian group by the social amalgamation of Ahoms, Kacharis, Deoris and other Mongolian people'. In Forward, 5 January, 1935; File of Newspaper Cuttings, ASA. Subsequently, in the 1941 elections, attempts were made for an alliance of 'Mongolia groups' and for Ahom to be declared a Racial Minority in Assam. See Yasmin Saikia, "A Name Without a People," pp.208-9.

[138] The first proper notice of the Ahom language had been taken by the American Baptists, during their sojourn in the Sadiya area. While J.P. Wade and early-British observers had distinguished between the Bhakha of the Bailungs ('Ahom priests') and the spoken language, they had not understood its difference from the Assamiya idioms. The Rev. Brown was the first to observe that 'the Ahom is a branch of the Tai language which is spoken, with some variations, by the Khamtis, the Shyans, the Laos, and the Siamese, all of whom designate themselves by the general appellation of Tai. Among the Ahoms, or that portion of the Tai race inhabiting Assam, the language is nearly extinct, being cultivated only by the priests, as the ancient language of their religion; while their vernacular and common dialect, as well as that of the people, is Assamese.' See Rev. Nathan Brown, "Alphabets of the Tai language," No. 61, January 1837, Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

[139] It seems significant that this attempt was made in the wake of both India and Burma gaining independence.

[140] See Chapter 1 of the dissertation.

5 (6) Ahom Past, Assamese Future

Within the period of this study, we see the category Ahom taking a circuitous route, from Kshatriya to Racial Minority, a narrative that resembles that of several other 'movements from below' of this period of South Asian history.[141] Yet, this picture is complicated by the fact that simultaneously, we can trace another set of discursive connections, conflating Ahom with a heroic past for Assam. The striking thing about this narrative is that while Ahom publicists like Padmadhar did participate in its production, the main outlines of Ahom-as-Assamese came from their caste Hindu peers.[142] Ahom, in this discourse, emerged as a symbolic device to articulate a redeemed Assamese jati for the future. A striking instance of this comes from a letter received by the Simon Commission in 1929, from a publicist named Lambodar Kalita.[143] Unlike most of the other communications that came to the Commission, this did not make a plea for political representation on a community basis. Instead, it deplored 'the misrepresentation of the Ahoms, the pre-British rulers of Assam, in respect of the portrayal of their images and dresses and place among the uncivilised hill tribes of India in the Calcutta Museum Hall'.[144]

This protest was 'on behalf of the Assamese nation', which had managed to appropriate selected elements from an Ahom political repertoire and embellish them into a cultural lineage for the 'imagined community' that was coming into being.[145] Within this project, what was receiving priority was the inheritance from a successful Ahom polity, embellished with ingredients from 'Indic tradition'.

---

[141] For instance, the 'Dang Rajas' examined by Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, New Delhi, 1999. Also, the Gurungs of Nepal, in Donald A. Messerschmidt, *The Gurungs of Nepal: Conflict and Change in a Village*, Warminder, 1976.

[142] It should be noted that a number of presidents of the history sessions of the Assam Sahitya Sabha were of Ahom origin, whether amateur scholars such as Hiteswar Barbarua or Lila Gogoi, the Dibrugarh University historian who wrote an authoritative work on the Buranjis.

[143] Memorandum submitted by Government of Assam, *Report of Indian Statutory Commission, 1928-9*, Vol. 14, p.56.

[144] Ibid.

[145] At the same time, the Ahom public was sending in its own claims to selective political representation. The same memorandum mentioned that a meeting of Tezpur Ahom Association on 21 February, 1928, had requested special seats and a separate electorate for the Ahom community requested on account of 'their brilliant past and present backwardness'. Memorandum submitted by Government of Assam, *Report of Indian Statutory Commission,* p.37. This petition must have been initiated by Padmadhar Gohain Barua who had moved his base of operations to Tezpur, where he was running a new periodical called the Usha. He would subsequently join the Legislative Council as the nominated representative of the Ahom community.

The indignant denial that the 'pre-British rulers of Assam' were in any way comparable to 'savages' such as the 'naked Nagas' was symptomatic of the Assamese anxiety to filiate to an Indic genealogy. This was to be achieved by transforming images of the Ahom past into a glorious, heroic history for Assam, a conclusive indicator of their distinctiveness from their surrounding 'people without history' whom colonial ethnography was studying. It was this attention to an Ahom past, selectively rendered, that explained why, for the most part, it managed to elide any discussion of the contemporary Ahom public that was struggling to redeem itself from attributions of non-Aryan lowly status.

To return to Lambodar's letter, there is little doubt that if challenged, he would have justified his claims about the 'civilised' character of the Ahom by referring to first-hand evidence, the buranji chronicles they had left to posterity. Under the aegis of the Ahom dynasty, precolonial Assam had produced one of the largest numbers of locally written manuscripts – a result of the exchanges and interactions of what Saikia calls the conglomerate of people and cultures that came together at the crossroads of this land.[146] A particular kind of history and memory came to be constructed on the basis of these texts, within a chronicling genre patronised by the Ahom ruling class, called buranji. Most of them were written in ujani Assamiya, but some older ones were in an older Tai language.[147] Through them, the Assamese publicists sought affiliation with the prime site of colonial power/knowledge - History. While they acknowledged the mastery of their new rulers over this practice of modernity, this intelligentsia claimed to have their own particular expertise to offer, as inheritors of a vernacular chronicling tradition akin to the Western model of 'objective', state-centred historical prose.

These participants in the colonial knowledge project had no doubts as to the role and significance of these texts. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan stated in 1855,

> In no department of literature do the Assamese appear to have been more successful than in history...The chain of historical events, since the last six hundred years, has been carefully preserved, and their authenticity can be relied upon. It would be difficult to name all the historical works, or as they are styled by the Assamese, Buranjis.

---

[146] Saikia, "A Name Without a People."
[147] Ibid, pp.72-9. Also see Brown, "Alphabets of the Tai Language."

> They are numerous and voluminous. According to the custom of the country, a knowledge of the Buranjis was an indispensable qualification in an Assamese gentleman, and every family of distinction, and especially the government and public officers, kept the most minute records of historical events, prepared by the learned Pundits of the country.[148]

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, the actual texts that Anandaram was referring to had died out, along with their patrons and subjects among the Ahom ruling class. But this death came to overlap with a rebirth, with the mythical status buranji was achieving as a precursor of the modern history the colonial intelligentsia aspired to write. With encouragement from British officials and the American missionaries, buranjis were now re/formed - from manuscript to print, from a status of chronicle to that of a history of Assam.[149] The production of the neo-buranjis by Haliram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Padmadhar Gohain Barua had become the key to celebrate an unique facet of the Assamese vernacular - its two-pronged attachment to Ahom buranji and Western history.

As a number of recent scholars have shown, from Bengal to Maharashtra to Gujarat, History had become the great symbol of a new age for nineteenth-century colonial intellectuals.[150] But the important thing to keep in mind, as far as the Assamese discourse is concerned, is the self-perception of these mythmakers that it was an unbroken tradition of recording the past that they were participating in, and one that was uniquely theirs. To draw a contrast with another region, we find that their contemporaries in Gujarat, for instance, were clearly distinguishing between the new narratives, written by those who were acquainted with the Western model of history, and those from the precolonial period which followed Puranic conventions. But the Assamese publicist was stressing his ties to a

---

[148] Maheswar Neog ed., *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language*, Calcutta, 1855 (reprint Guwahati, 1959).

[149] For instance, Kasinath Tamuli Phukan, *Assam Buranji-Sar*, Sibsagar, 1844 and S.K. Bhuyan, ed., Harakanta Barua's *Assam Buranji or A History of Assam From the Commencement of Assam in 1826 AD, being an Enlarged Version of the Chronicle of Kasinath Tamuli Phukan*, Guwahati, 1930, which were essentially printed adaptations of old (untitled) manuscripts. Also, extracts from buranji manuscripts were reprinted in the Orunodoi periodical.

[150] See Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Cambridge, Mass., 1997; Sudipto Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*, Delhi, 1996; Stewart Gordon, *The New Cambridge History of India: The Marathas, 1600-1818*, Cambridge, 1993; Sudhir Chandra, *The Oppressive Present: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1992 amongst others.

lengthy local tradition which had seamlessly continued into the present. The Assamese could assure himself that he alone among his contemporaries shared in the Western mode of objective history, thanks to his exclusive inheritance from the Ahom. This assertion of an unique possession was all the more important for a people who were acutely conscious of being on the periphery as far as Indic civilisation was concerned - thus, a constant underlying theme was that the hegemonic Bengali did not possess this attribute of precolonial historical prose![151] The denial of history to the Indian by James Mill was adopted by the Assamese intelligentsia to elevate itself above its otherwise 'advanced' peers from other regions, and implicitly to emphasise the Assamese suitability for the European Enlightenment's notion of progress, or unnati. Symbolically, History in Assam became coterminous with the local term buranji, rather than the Indic 'itihasa'.

Saikia has traced how this 'authentic' historical genre was attributed a continuous lineage reaching back into the hoary past, encompassing a diverse range of chronicles bundled under the label buranji. The term itself, translated by Hem Chandra Goswami for Edward Gait and George Grierson as a 'storehouse of knowledge', made a leap from a generic to a textual tag. It came to signify the colonial publicists' affiliation to a seemingly seamless record of the past dating from the legendary migration of the Ahom into Assam.[152] The myth of a thirteenth-century origin for the Ahom was occluded into an origin for the chronicles themselves, evading the fact that most of the manuscripts were clearly of much later provenance, none earlier than the seventeenth century. The rhetoric of historical status that Anandaram Dhekial Phukan pioneered had been initially used to strengthen the claims of Assamese to be a language of hoary antiquity, to satisfy colonial linguistic parameters. However, by the first decades of the

---

[151] Local historians such as S. K. Bhuyan often speculated about 'ancient' links between Kashmir and Assam, which would allow a connection to be inferred between the writers of the historically pioneering *Rajtarangini* text and those of the Buranjis! A number of other transactions were mooted between Assam and Kashmir – such as his account of Princess Amritaprabha, a medieval Assamese princess who took Buddhism from Assam to her husband's kingdom in Kashmir. See Bhuyan, *Studies in the History of Assam*, Guwahati, 1965.

[152] See Sayeeda Yasmin Saikia, "A Name Without a People: Searching to be Tai-Ahom in Modern India," Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Wisconsin, 1999. The first few manuscripts that came into missionary hands were initially printed as serials in the Orunodoi periodical in the 1850s. From the 1930s, a massive program of publication of these chronicles was undertaken, a joint undertaking between the Assamese intelligentsia and the provincial government, through the agency of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti and its official counterpart, the newly established Department of Antiquities and Historical Research.

twentieth century, buranji as history was being positioned to pursue another quest, for nation.[153]

Vasudha Dalmia's insightful work on the Hindi intelligentsia has shown how in the nineteenth century, 'tradition was being formed in the very process of negotiating the relationship to past idioms and classical texts in the light of present needs and claims, in order to project itself as a coherent and even a homogenous entity'.[154] This dissertation has tried to explore how another intelligentsia in colonial South Asia, while constructing the public domain of Assamese, attempted to reify as 'history' a body of texts called Assam Buranji.[155] The recent work by Yasmin Saikia tends to unilaterally attribute such an 'invention' of historical tradition to the agency of the colonial interlocutor. While agreeing that cultural forms in societies newly classified as 'traditional' were often reconstructed and transformed by and through the categories of colonial knowledge, we need to look further than the initiatives mounted by British officials.[156]

While not underestimating the pivotal role of colonial patronage and knowledge, the ability of indigenous publicists to deploy this foray into 'history' for their project of jatiyo unnati requires underscoring. Hem Chandra Goswami and Padmadhar Gohain Barua had assisted Edward Gait in the 1890s in his official mission to collect historical materials,[157] which he subsequently used for his History of Assam in 1906.[158] In this text, Gait's nod of approval to the buranji genre of Assam further served to consolidate the myth-making around it, as did his emphasis on the Ahom past at the expense of its contemporaries such as the Koch and Kachari states.[159] But, in actuality, the ball had already been set rolling

---

[153] As access to state patronage for Assamese increased, the urgency to assert 'local particularity' for the Assamese language seemed to recede somewhat. Language genealogies began to stress the contribution made by the medieval Vaishnavite reformers, thereby bringing the 'history' of Assamese language and literature more in step with that for other modern Indic vernaculars.
[154] Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalisation of Hindu Traditions*, Delhi, 1997, p.15.
[155] Some of them were Gunabhiram Barua, *Assam Buranji*, Calcutta, 1875; Padmadhar Gohain Barua, *Assam Buranji*, Tezpur, 1899 and Harinarayan Dutta Baruah, *Assam Buranji*, Guwahati, 1924.
[156] Saikia, "A Name Without a People".
[157] E.A. Gait, *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam*, Shillong, 1897.
[158] E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, London, 1906.
[159] Ibid, Preface.

by the literary productions within the Assamese print arena. The Orunodoi had led the way in this, with its publication of extracts from old Assamese chronicles as well as of essays on themes ranging from the burial sites of the Ahom kings to the history of the Delhi Sultanate. From the 1880s, Gunabhiram Barua, Hem Chandra Goswami and Ratneswar Mahanta, all stalwarts of the ABUSS, were writing essays about the Ahom period, published in the new vernacular periodicals such as Assam Bandhu and the Jonaki.[160] Ostensibly responding to the administrative and pedagogical requirements of the colonial state, such print productions served as 'a poetics about a homeland and its peoples...[one] that transforms the geography of an area into primal, homelike or sacred space and transforms a people into a collectivity with imagined ties of shared origins and kinship'.[161]

5 (7) History, Hero and the contours of Nation

Assam's first professional historian, Surya Kumar Bhuyan, explicitly stated his aims as a scholar and a nationalist. 'Give me the buranjis of Assam and I will say what the people of Assam are. The buranjis are our strengthening tie to bind us with the past, and maintain the solidarity of the Assamese people, and protect us from any threatened erosion of our nationalism'.[162] Beginning his career teaching English at the Cotton College in Gauhati, Bhuyan later earned a doctorate in history from the University of London. He was the most prolific among the host of 'history-minded' individuals among this intelligentsia, building upon the inscription and manuscript hunting that had taken off in the last part of the nineteenth century, culminating in the founding of the Kamrup Anushilan Samiti ('Kamrup Research Society') in 1912. From 1925, every annual conference of the Asom Sahitya Sabha came to include a special session on history. It is worth noting that Bhuyan attempted to forge links with like-minded excavators of 'national' history in other parts of India, by bringing the rich vein of knowledge

---

[160] For instance, Gunabhiram Barua's series on "Agor din Etiyar Din" in the Assam Bandhu and the pieces by Hem Chandra Goswami such as "Maharaj Rudra Singhar Dinot Asom" and Ratneswar Mahanta's "Moamoria Bidroh" in the Jonaki issues at the turn of the century.
[161] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Pennsylvania, 1999, p.8.
[162] S.K. Bhuyan, "Sources of Assam History", in Bulletin II of the DHAS, February 23, 1924.

that Assam possessed to their attention, particularly for Maharashtrians, whose recovery of a Maratha past he saw as akin to his own.[163]

Despite the academic and institutional trappings that this History was beginning to acquire, its distinctiveness from myth and fiction was not always apparent. This, again, was a tendency that the Assamese shared with other vernacular publics. As Sudipta Kaviraj puts it, the colonial intelligentsia was beginning to 'write an enormous amount of history, much of which was respectable in modern academic terms, but much besides that was 'fraudulent'. This generation wrote histories of what happened, and also of what never happened, and the interesting part is that they saw the latter as being part of the enterprise of putting together an historical narrative'.[164] Bhuyan's oeuvre provides a striking instance of this eclectic approach to the past, with his editions of old buranji manuscripts and well-regarded scholarly tomes coexisting in the same space as semi-fictional historical biographies and his magnum opus in Assamese, Jaymati Upakhyan, a verse epic written in the guise of a traditional ballad.[165] While Bhuyan stood alone in this public persona that juxtaposed an Ossian mode with that of Ranke, his predecessors among the Assamese intelligentsia had also treated History in protean manner. Their excursions into its terrain had involved the appropriation of a variety of modes - ranging from the short 'factual' essay that was a staple of the vernacular periodical, to a plethora of Walter Scott and R.C. Dutt inspired novels and plays.[166] The didactic agenda that Bhuyan had expressed was seen as equally well served by both fiction and fact, often occurring simultaneously, with a consequent blurring of the boundary between the two.

---

[163] Bhuyan's work on the Ahom general Lachit Barphukan who defeated the Mughal forces in the sixteenth century, was replete with comparisons to Shivaji and the Maratha struggle against the Mughals. See *Lachit Barphukan and His Times,* Guwahati, 1947.

[164] Sudipta Kaviraj, "Imaginary History: Narrativising of the Nation in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay," in P.C. Chatterjee ed., *Self-Images, Identity and Nationality*, New Delhi, 1989, p.227.

[165] Examples of these different genres would be the faux historical ballad, *Jaymati Upakhyan*, Guwahati, 1920; the 'historical' biography, a la Tacitus, *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, and Bhuyan's book of his doctoral thesis from London University, *Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771-1826*, Guwahati, 1949.

[166] The best-known name in historical fiction was Rajani Kanta Bordoloi, whose works ranged from the 'ethnographic' romance, *Miri Jiyari* ('Daughter of the Miris') published in 1895 to a series of novels set at the time of the Burmese invasion of Assam.

Since most of these texts explicitly stated their intent of redressing the scarcity of vernacular print material, their readership could be conflated with a notion of people at large. Such a notion was usually quite distant from the objective reality of the situation. As Riho Isaka has shown in the case of Gujarat, 'the images of history in this period are characterised by a conscious and continuous move to describe history in a specific form and to spread this history among a wide range of the population'.[167] A new collective self was coming into existence through a series of elisions and omissions, of class, caste and gender, around the generalised term jati. Kaviraj's illustration of the reworking of jati by perhaps the most famous South Asian interlocutor of the terms 'History' and 'Jati', provides an insight into this process. In Bankim Chandra Chatterji's writings,

> We find the most diverse identities being called jatis. These range from castes [jat or jati] to Bengalis, to the Hindus, to Indians...The ambiguity of the meaning of jati...[is] an index of a historical difficulty of discourse: ... trying to stretch its meaning in an unaccustomed direction; making it spell something which it was not accustomed to spelling out...nationality or nation! Evidently, he [Bankim] is attempting a gerrymandering of the meaning-boundaries of this concept, cancelling its earlier indeterminacy, and fixing it on to the new, unfamiliar meaning.[168]

With this new expanded scope for jati, the intelligentsia could plausibly claim to speak for much more than the narrow reading public which actually engaged with their texts.

Jati was thus the locus for the grand project of nation, a narrative wherein the Assamese intelligentsia would transmute selected elements of a dynastic past into an evocative allegory of sacrifice and redemption. A survey of such texts reveals that the most popular image they deployed was that of Jaymati, an Ahom princess tortured to death by her husband's enemies when she refused to betray him.[169]

---

[167] Riho Isaka, "The Gujarati Literati and the Construction of a Regional Identity in the Late Nineteenth Century," Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Cambridge, 1999, p.263.
[168] Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness*, p.74.
[169] The story was set in the early seventeenth century, a period of internecine strife between different clans of the Ahom royalty, with powerful ministers ensuring that a series of puppet rulers followed each other on the throne in quick succession. One of them was Gobar, belonging to the Tungkhungia clan. The protagonist, Jaymati Kunwari was the wife of his son, Gadapani. The narrative usually began at the point when the latest royal weakling was the Lora Raja ('boy king'), who was entirely dominated by his minister, Laluk Barphukan. Gadapani's valour and popularity made him a formidable rivalry and they therefore planned to seize and kill him, as had already been done for other potential claimants to the throne. But having got wind of the plan, Jaymati

From its first appearance at the turn of the century, Jaymati went through a variety of renditions, reaching its pinnacle of fame in the first Assamese film in 1935.[170] The legitimating rhetoric for this narrative was taken to be its historical 'authenticity', Jaymati as a living ancestor from a glorious past, the history of the Assamese jati as extracted from the Ahom buranji. In comparison to other images of female virtue appropriated from Indic mythology such as Draupadi and Savitri, Jaymati held special place in 'local particularity' for the region's population, a region-specific hero for the jati.

The thin line that national hagiographies maintain between history, myth and fiction is well illustrated by the mythology of origin that came to surround this image. In actuality, these publicists had obtained very little material from the scanty Buranji allusions – which did not even mention this figure by name in their accounts, referring to her as 'Gadapani's woman'.[171] The main sources for the modern Jaymati texts were the ballads handed down among the women of Upper Assam. That oral material was enriched by the imagination of the male publicist – arriving at increasingly more vivid descriptions of Jaymati's interactions with her husband, the exiled prince Gadapani, his enemies at the Ahom court, and of Gadapani's sojourn among the Nagas while his wife was being tortured in Sibsagar. Significantly, the 'folk' basis of their inspiration went un-acknowledged by all the writers of these texts. Nor did they openly credit even their own imaginations for the embellishments they had created. It is to be

---

persuaded her husband to flee to the Naga hills. When they came for him, they seized her in his stead. From the late-nineteenth century, in scenes reminiscent of Draupadi's ordeal at Kaurava hands, Assamese writers depicted Jaymati being humiliated at the Ahom court and even publicly tortured - in attempts to make her reveal his whereabouts. Gadapani, safe among his Naga allies, heard of this and came back disguised as a Naga, to persuade her to give him up. But she refused, sent him away, and died soon afterwards, at the hands of her torturers. The heroic Jaymati's sacrifice was not in vain, as Gadapani subsequently managed to defeat his rivals and take the throne, founding the mighty Tungkhungia line. His son Rudra Singha's rule was acknowledged to be the zenith of Ahom power. Various publicists added their own embellishments to this basic storyline, with Gadapani helped by a Muslim pohari ('woman trader') in one version, and with picturesque motifs of Naga scenery and women in others. The best known came to be that by Lakshminath Bezbarua, in which a simple Naga child of nature, Dalimi, fell in love with the fugitive Ahom prince.

[170] Ratneswar Mahanta, "Jaymati," in Jogendranath Bhuyan ed., *Ratneswar Mahanta Rasanavali*, Guwahati, 1994; Padmadhar Gohain Baruah, *Jaymati Kunwari*, Calcutta, 1900; Ramdas Goswami (Ratneswar Mahanta), "Jaymati Kunwari and Langi Gadapani," Jonaki, Vol. 3, Parts 11-12, 1901 and Lakshminath Bezbaruah, *Jaymati Kunwari*, Calcutta, 1915.

[171] This comes in a verse in Dutiram Hazarika's verse Mss edited by S. K. Bhuyan as *Assamar Padya Buranji*, Guwahati, 1932 (reprint 1984).

concluded that as yet, neither Fiction nor Folklore was acceptable in lieu of History. The slur perpetuated by James Mill upon Indians had been subject to a certain degree of contestation, but that had been only partially successful. The litany of Gait, Grierson and Gurdon – the figure of the colonial interlocutor had provided strong sanction for the 'local particularity' that Assam possessed in Buranji. For Buranji's self-professed heirs of the Assamese intelligentsia, what was required by the national story they were inscribing, was an affirmation from an impeccable textual genealogy. Hence, the ensuing irony that while a female hero was being created for the nation, via an appropriation of a female-centred popular tradition, contemporary women writers obtained a very limited role within it.

While warrior figures such as Lachit Barphukan were also popular choices, the cultural representations of this period gave pride of place to the female hero. The hagiography of Jaymati, representing female heroism, self-sacrifice and conjugal virtue, took centre-stage, as a 'secular' icon for this nation-in-waiting (with Sankardeb as the devotional genealogy's counterpart).[172] In recent years, the centrality of gender in the formation of nationalist identities in South Asia has been extensively studied, and it would be useful to examine this 'local discourse' in the light of those findings.[173] Confronted with the images of the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Native', the colonial intelligentsia tended to react in two related ways.[174] On the one hand, they identified positively with the British diagnosis of the Indian condition and its prescription for redemption, going on to advocate social reform with iconoclastic zeal. But at the same time, they felt constrained to prove their humanitarian instincts in the eyes of those who doubted them on this front. Susie Tharu suggests that as a response to the British emphasis on native oppression of women, Indian progressives tended to privilege an image of a woman who was not socially victimised, but voluntarily chose the

---

[172] In a forthcoming article, I explore the question why Jaymati gradually lapsed into irrelevance after Independence, and Lachit became more and more prominent, as did a political discourse privileging the 'boys', in present-day Northeast India.

[173] Some recent works are Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, New Delhi, 1998; Indira Chowdhuri, *The Frail Hero and Virile History,* New Delhi, 1999; Rosalind O'Hanlon, *A Comparison between Men and Women: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India*, Madras, 1994 and Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban: A Modern Autobiography*, New Delhi, 1999.

[174] See Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity.*

path of suffering and death in order to save her people.[175] It is this light that we can view the depictions of Jaymati. Through them, the figure of woman was rescued from its associations with coercive force to enter a realm, temporally distant yet still capable of recovery. This was a sphere where Jaymati's spiritual strength had overcome the petty victory of her enemies to bring her consort and his dynasty to a glorious destiny for Assam. Such a female hero emerged through suffering and sacrifice, to make a moral point far more telling than a story of male valour could.

At the same time, another, more conservative rendition of this image was making its presence felt, with Jaymati 'Kunwari' making way for 'Sati' Jaymati. In line with the representations of women in neighbouring Bengal, publicists such as Kumudeswar Barthakur were reconfiguring Jaymati as a Hindu embodiment of chastity, the pure symbol of a female life of self-abnegation and devotion to husband and dharma.[176] While the 'Sati' dimension did overlap considerably with the 'Kunwari', the emphasis was now shifting away from the local foundation of the myth. What we can discern was how the 'Sati' framework was bringing the narrative towards a more acceptably Indic model – allowing both the subject and author to find admittance into a 'Hindu' universe.

There is another aspect of this shift which needs to be kept in view. The use of the term 'Sati' cannot be regarded as innocent of its contested terrain over the nineteenth century. While Assam had never experienced the widow burnings that 'Sati' had come to signify, its upper-caste elite had followed its Bengali counterparts in positing a Brahminical ideology of female virtue as a normative standard for the new public arenas. The second unions prevalent among non-Brahmin groups, the presence of women on the fields and in petty trade, even the 'license' displayed during the harvest-festival dance of the Bihu – for the culture of the vernacular periodicals, all these aspects of local life necessitated reform.

---

[175] Susie Tharu, "Tracing Savitri's Pedigree: Victorian Racism and the Image of Women in Indo-Anglian Literature", in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid ed., *Recasting Women* , Delhi, 1989, p.258.

[176] Kumudeswar Barthakur, *Jaymati Kahini*, Calcutta, 1918. Though little is known of this author, like others among his peers, he appears to have been a young student at the time he wrote this text. Later works, on similar themes of female heroism, about Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi and Joan of Arc continued to appear from him, well into the 1950s.

Against these 'social evils' were juxtaposed new ideals of conjugal compatibility and female education, designed to equip the nation's women to play wife and mother to its men. The pedestal of 'Sati', acquired through the Agni-pariksha ('ordeal by fire') of Jaymati's martyrdom, served to assert Assamese suitability for the elevated destiny of the new Indian woman.[177] Occasionally, a frisson of unease did break through this discourse. For instance, Kumudeswar felt bound to acknowledge that his readers might be surprised at being asked to revere this figure from the Ahom past, 'a non-Hindu woman who was ritually impure' even though she exemplified 'all the virtues of Hindu icons such as Sita'![178] But the allotting of Sati to Jaymati would banish such doubts, and bring assurance of her rightful place in the pantheon of Arya virtue starting with Sita, Damayanti and Savitri.[179] By the 1920s, this revised pantheon for Assamese womanhood had begun to make its way into textbooks for girls' schools.[180] Kumudeswar's objective, 'to disseminate knowledge about Jaymati among the ignorant sections such as women and rural folk, who were ignorant of her name and virtues'[181] seemed well on the way to realisation. Indeed, Jaymati was spawning imitators, as Kaivarta publicists, in their quest for Hindu respectability 'excavated' another Sati, Radhika, from their own past.

By the 1920s, we see a rapid spread of Jaymati-as-Sati as the core theme of a corpus of didactic writings by a newly literate generation of elite women. Over the next decade, most of these texts were produced for an annual commemoration, Jaymati Utsav. This had been first organised in 1913, to commemorate Jaymati's martyrdom and inspire her 'daughters' to similar feats. The Assamiya newspaper described these celebrations at great length – also giving space to appeals for greater participation by women, speeches, editorials and letters. By the 1920s, as this information was disseminated over Assam, the celebrations of Jaymati Utsav spread all over the towns and villages of the Brahmaputra valley. This was now a public arena where, for the first time, women were deemed capable of conducting its deliberations, to celebrate one of their own sex. This is not to gainsay the fact

[177] Other 'Sati' texts of this period included Dugdhanath Khaund, *Sati Haran Natak*, undated; Purnalata Das, *Sati Pradhika*, Calcutta, 1933 and Dandinath Kalita, *Satir Tej*, 1930.
[178] Barthakur, *Jaymati*.
[179] Ibid.
[180] See Kasinath Burman, *Nari-Ratna*, Calcutta, 1930.
[181] Barthakur, *Jaymati*.

that the Utsav itself had been initiated by men, and many of them still ran it from behind the scenes. In addition, a large number of the female participants were sisters and wives of those same men, mostly belonging to the caste intelligentsia. A good instance is that of the Chaliha family of tea planters.[182] At Sibsagar, the first Jaymati Utsav was organised by Radhikaprasad Sarma and Taraprasad Chaliha. Nikunjalata and Kamalaloya, Taraprasad's mother and wife, respectively, were the first women to be involved in its activities. The two women subsequently organised a range of Gandhian-style initiatives – from running a Sipini Bhoraal ('weaver's organisation'), and training village women in domestic crafts, to editing the first women's magazine in the Assamese language, Ghar Jeuti.[183]

In the context of such an arena - one where only a minority of subordinate social groups managed to carve out a presence, it is doubly essential to examine their ideologies and actions without hastily dismissing them as derivative or conformist. It would be as well to remind ourselves that women (and men) have no alternative but to form their identities within available discourses, or, with difficulty, against them.[184] Thus, we see that during the early years of the twentieth century, it was the theme of Sati Jaymati that allowed a substantial number of women's writings to enter the public domain of Assamese.[185] The nature of these texts bears examining, for what they reveal of the constitutive processes that these publics were undergoing. The first noteworthy feature is how the style of these 'Sati' narratives visibly differed, between the ones by women, and the ones by men. What we can glean from this are the differences in mental horizons within this new public, how writing itself was structured by gender and class.

---

[182] The Chalihas were a prominent tea planter family, located between Calcutta and Upper Assam. The main entrepreneur among them was Jadav Prasad Chaliha, whose children subsequently settled in Calcutta and took Bengali spouses. One of his brothers, Bimala Prasad, became Chief Minister of Assam. Another sibling, Tara Prasad, imbibed liberal notions about women during a stint in England in the 1920s, including the ideas of Stopes. After his return to Assam, he encouraged his wife and sister to run the Ghar Jeuti periodical.

[183] The periodical was run from the Chaliha home in Sibsagar between 1928 and 1932, edited by the two women, albeit with a considerable degree of supervision by Taraprasad. A male 'Munshi' was also on the premises, to carry out any public tasks. Personal communication from Reena Chaliha, September, 2000.

[184] Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire, Women's Sexuality Today*, London, 1984.

[185] There was a pitifully small number of women writing in Assamese during earlier decades, the most well known being Padmabati Devi Phukanani, the daughter of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan.

For instance, it becomes quite clear that the female products, most of them from authors who had received very little formal education, were conspicuously innocent of the narrative devices and embellishments displayed by the male writers. The latter had employed diverse genres - plays, epic verse, lengthy essays and finally, a filmic narrative, to flesh out the prescriptive discourse around Jaymati. Quite often, in these male imaginations, the figure of Jaymati had hardly anything to say. The main rhetoric tended to centre around the male characters expressing authorial opinions on the nature of the state and sovereignty.[186] In contrast, the female texts tended to be brief essays of perhaps a page or so, with not a single fictional foray among them.[187] Their writing placed the virtues and tribulations of Jaymati as a straightforward statement of fact, a lesson earnestly recited without recourse to any kind of subtlety. As Tanika Sarkar points out, this was a fairly common feature of didactic literature, with the weight of this genre lying in the very dullness of constant repetition.[188] Many appeared as entries for the essay competitions run by the Ghar Jeuti periodical to commemorate Jaymati Utsav. In all probability, they represented their writers' first ventures of paper to pen – making it doubly necessary for a flourish of commitment to socially approved values.

Writing on such a heroic theme could be an act of veneration, as well as of appropriation - the most suitable activity for young women who had to display both their education and their virtue. Despite the obsession of nationalists throughout India with the 'woman's question' in one form or another, there was little formal role for these women in the predominantly masculine world of political discourse. Rosaldo points out that 'in those societies where domestic and public spheres are firmly differentiated, women may win power and value by stressing their differences from men. By accepting and elaborating upon the symbols and expectations associated with their cultural definition, they may goad

---

[186] Lakhidhar Sarma, "Sati Jaymati Kunwari," in Abahon, Vol. 3, 1935.
[187] Some of them were Jagyadalata Duara, Shantiprabha Gohain Baruah, Punyaprabha Gohain Baruah and Kamalaloya Kakoti – all of them wrote for the Ghar Jeuti. Hardly any other works have been obtained by them.
[188] Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win*, p.251.

men into compliance, or establish a society unto themselves'.[189] While the small numbers of South Asian women interacting within the public sphere were too constrained by their limited access to 'authentic' sources and information production to construct alternative role models, they did manage to utilise the limited opportunities they received. Colonial observers would disapprovingly observe that 'it is regrettable that women were encouraged to take a prominent part in anti-government demonstrations, forming political associations among themselves, attending and speaking at political meetings and even taking an active part as so-called volunteers in picketing and boycott'.[190] While such a Gandhian model of social action brought many out of their homes as part of a political public, it has to be kept in mind that it deployed a vocabulary largely restricted to domestic and nurturing concerns.

The imprint of these issues is discernible in the first Assamese film, Jaymati Kunwari, based upon the play by Lakshminath Bezbarua.[191] Its maker, Jyotiprasad Agarwala had been fired with the possibilities of film as a didactic medium after his stint at the UEFA studios in Germany, where he had gone after being released from prison after the Non-Cooperation movement.[192] He saw Jaymati as the 'perfect Satyagrahi' - a theme which would unite his twin affiliations to the local and the national. His film's protagonist would thereby represent both the glory of Assamese culture and the strength of the political ideals being propagated by the nationalist movement. We see the quest for the particular 'authentic' in Jyotiprasad's determination to acquire a woman with the right lineage and virtue for the quasi-sacred lead role. From his family tea estate, he scoured the neighbouring countryside looking for a young girl with the necessary qualities for the role.[193] His final choice of Aideo Sandikai, a fourteen-

---

[189] Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview", in Rosaldo and Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture and Society*, Berkeley, 1974, p.37.
[190] *Assam Administrative Report*, 1930-1, Shillong, 1931, ii.
[191] The film's script was based upon the play *Jaymati Kunwari* written by Lakshminath Bezbaruah and published from Calcutta in 1915. The film premiered in 1935 at Calcutta. Since Assam did not yet have any film theatres, the Agarwala family showed it in a number of local venues using a mobile screen. Later, they established the region's first cinema hall at Tezpur.
[192] In a region where linguistic and ethnic differences have been seen as threatening the very existence of Assamese nationality, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, the descendant of Rajasthani migrants who assimilated very successfully into local society and culture, has become a cultural icon and is invariably cited as an ideal to follow by today's advocates of 'national integration'
[193] Personal communication from Vivekanand and Hridayanand Agarwala, Tezpur, August, 2000.

year-old from a respectable Ahom family, received permission from the head of the erstwhile royal family for the unprecedented event of a young girl acting on screen. This permission was managed partly due to the director's social position and partly as she was to depict a character who added lustre to the Ahom name![194] Ironically, the girl herself was not told of her destination or of the work there. A male relative took her out, purportedly to see a big ship on the Brahmaputra river, and delivered her to the film set on the tea garden owned by the Agarwala family.[195]

The other major female role in the film was an imaginary figure - Dalimi, a Naga girl who falls in love with Gadapani, Jaymati's fugitive husband. Lakshminath's romantic imagination had replaced the Muslim pohari woman, Bai, in the first printed rendition of Jaymati, by this nubile figure, and Jyotiprasad followed suit.[196] The casting for Dalimi was seen as much simpler than for Jaymati, since she could be played by any attractive young girl – significantly, there was no thought of necessity to cast an 'authentic' Naga in the role.[197] One of the best known sequences from the film showed a nubile Dalimi dancing in the forest in scanty 'Naga' attire, in sharp contrast to the sober visage of Jaymati at worship, shrouded from head to foot. Jaymati had overwritten the 'parbatiya' status for the Ahom by the civilised trappings of an Assamese Hindu past, juxtaposed against its necessary Other, the 'child of nature' from the surrounding Naga hills. Ahom and Assamese had achieved union in the first filmic representation that Assam had achieved, against the verdant backdrop of a tea estate owned by a local capitalist-cum-literary dynasty.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that while some broad categories in the broader colonial and nationalist discourse were mobilised for the region, the specific features of

---

[194] In all events, Aideo's own village did not see it that way for many years, she was ostracised and could not get married. Ironically, she, the real-life Jaymati, was never even shown the film!
[195] Interview with Hridayananda Agarwala, August 2001.
[196] Mahanta, "Jaymati."
[197] In my interview of one of the few survivors from the shoot, the director's younger brother, Vivekanand, he told me that for the role of the Naga, any sexy girl would have done, as opposed to the regal presence the role of Jaymati required, which only breeding and virtue could convey.

provincial and local discourse in the context of its changing political economy were the pivot around which social identities were being generated. It has explored the institutions and discursive relations through which notions of community came to be expressed, ranging from formally constituted organisations to a wide array of more informally organised activities, sited around the protean term jati. Such a term, around which community and its expressions were shaping themselves, gradually acquired a new meaning, overlapping with previous ones, as a synonym for nation. Significantly, the near absence of the term rashtra seems to indicate the still problematic relationship of state with this collective self. While Indian was acquiring force as a cultural index for jati to affiliate itself to, it had not yet acquired any real resonance with political belonging.

For such jatis, while access to cultural products allowed for at least potential claims to wider attention, the location of competing publics in a single structured setting worked to the advantage of some and the disadvantage of others. The chapter has shown how expansion of such public arenas accompanied efforts to define and protect community boundaries against those perceived to be outside them. In this process certain shared values and behaviours were self-consciously chosen for emphasis: participants simultaneously defined their own community and created Other/s, encompassing those outside the boundaries they drew.[198] There were not only important internal hierarchies of class, gender and status within each group, but also alliances across various axes, not least of them the hegemony acquired by the standardised Assamese language dominated by the caste intelligentsia. This uneven and contradictory intersection of power structures helps to explain why the Kachari and Kaivarta publics for instance, remained so much more dependent upon the state, with many of the more autonomous attempts at assertion remaining virtually obscured.

The chapter has gone on to explore how the dominant strand of Assamese nationalism was imagining myths for itself, and how these were re/constituted by the constant remapping of a people, its past and its future. Sumit Sarkar has stressed how such imaginings of romantic nationalism usually accompany a more

---

[198] Sandria B. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India*, Berkeley, 1989, p.13.

or less deliberate elision of class hierarchies and inequities within a general rubric of a politics of identity.[199] Such representations 'that serve to describe society as those social agents thought it was or wished it to be'[200] involved for the Assamese intelligentsia, a gendering of roles as part of the unnati ('progress') that was envisaged for the future of samaj ('society') and jati ('nation'). Precolonial texts, colonial knowledge and modern print productions were all elements of the bricolage of a seamless past, present and future being harnessed for an Assamese nation. It has explored in depth one such attempt at creating a morally uplifting literature, a suitably elevated oeuvre to buttress Assamese cultural claims, against a backdrop of Gandhian mobilisation. Such a foray into heroic history played an important role in establishing hegemony for the Assamese public sphere over its less versatile contemporaries in the region. A fragile unity emerged through these processes through into the 1930s, though the seeds of future, violent contestation over the physical and social contours of the region vis-a-vis an independent nation were already present to some extent.[201]

---

[199] Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, p.21.
[200] Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, tr. Lydia G. Cochrane, Cambridge, 1988, p.6.
[201] The migration of a predominantly Muslim peasantry from East Bengal, Muslim League and Congress acrimony, the clout exerted over official structures by the conservative planter lobby, the antagonism between the middle-class politics of Sylhet and the Brahmaputra valley and the patronising attitude of the Assamese caste Hindu intelligentsia towards 'tribals' created fissures which find echoes until this day.

Conclusion

The long century of "The Making of Modern Assam" involved the physical reshaping of Assam as much as the social. For most of the period, Assam continued to be covered by vast expanses of forest with a peasantry practising both shifting and settled agricultural modes. The countryside was dotted with hamlets rather than villages, and with small rururban clusters rather than large towns. The region was still marked by an almost complete absence of the city traditions characteristic of other parts of South Asia. Under those circumstances, it was the distant Bengal metropolis of Calcutta that provided Assam's intelligentsia with its first exposure to the urban dimensions of colonial modernity. The combination of subsistence peasant 'rurality' with an intensive economy of the plantation played a significant role in providing social identities in Assam with a distinctive character of their own. Despite this, there were other factors at work which allows for analogies to be drawn with other regions on the Indian subcontinent. Assam's severance from the Southeast Asian context - of participation in Burmese and Sinic modes - paralleled that of Kashmir from the adjacent territories of Afghanistan and Central Asia.[1] Again, an affinity can be traced between the transition from an old Ahom patria to a nation-as-region of Assam, dominated by a public which structured itself around 'invented traditions' of *bhakti*, language and heroic history, and that of the emergence of Maharashtra from a Maratha swarajya.[2]

The first chapter of the dissertation discussed how the imperatives of plantation production reordered the region's natural environment, with commons, forest and swidden lands being subjected to the industrial discipline of tea. In the manner of plantation economies in other parts of the empire, the social demographics of Assam were decisively transformed by the dynamics of this production system. The second chapter examined how colonial policy instituted the migration of 'coolies' from other

---

[1] Chitralekha Zutshi, "Community, State, and the Nation: Regional Patriotism and Religious Identities in the Kashmir Valley, c.1880-1953," Unpublished Dissertation, Tufts, 2000.

[2] Prachi Deshpande, "Narratives of Pride: History and Regional Identity in Maharashtra, c.1870-1960," Unpublished Dissertation, Tufts, 2002; Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*, Cambridge, 1985 and Veena Naregal, "English in the Colonial University and the Politics of Language: the Emergence of a Public Sphere in Western India (1830-80)," Unpublished Dissertation, London, 1998.

regions to serve as a docile work force – an institution whose scarcity in Assam was attributed to the 'indolence' of its inhabitants. The plantation regime gradually consolidated itself as a verdant self-contained world to which the local villager would possess little or no access. The dissertation considered how these policies were aimed at creating a distinct 'enclave sector' for tea production, and how this played a significant role in racialising the figure of the coolie for the indigenous population. These depictions of 'non-Aryan' groups were counterposed against a hegemonic social identity of 'Assamiya', manifested through the new public culture of vernacular print.

From the late-nineteenth-century, the establishment of the telegraph, steamers and railways was beginning to integrate Assam into the commercialised networks of the Indian hinterland. Official discussions of the thousands of people who were born outside the province were alluding not just to the plantation coolie, but also to the Marwari trader, the Nepali grazier and the latest arrival, the Mymensinghia peasant who was instrumental in bringing the char ('river-bank lands') under cultivation. The dissertation has shown how, until the end of the century, indigenous public opinion was mostly in favour of this process. It shared the colonial view that the speediest way to achieve unnati ('progress') was by opening up the homeland to these incomers. However, the local elite's competitive interactions with another category of settler, the Bengali babu, gradually replaced this acquiescence by a rhetoric of social exclusion and linguistic nativism premised upon a new conception of Assamese identity.

The accelerated involvement with territories and people from other regions of the subcontinent was instrumental in the refiguring of the devotional idiom of local Vaishnavism into a wider, abstract form of deification. The third chapter examines this process as part of a general move - from an embodied form of specialised knowledge towards an abstracted institutional knowledge structure - symptomatic of a desire for affiliation with a broader range of South Asian symbolic networks. Once again, it is possible to link up with similar developments in other parts of South Asia, and beyond. For instance, the Vaishnavite Shankaracharyas, previously representatives of a powerful but localised devotional network in Southern India, were gradually assimilated into a wider 'Hindu' cultural network as symbols of pan-Indian

religious authority. However, it has to be kept in mind that this homogenisation has been nowhere as complete in Assam, at least, until the recent past.

The dissertation has examined how the prospects of colonial education, service employment and political representation served to transform the intelligentsia's conception of the relationship between a desh and its people. Precolonial notions of belonging had posited an opposition between the 'Bangal' and the 'Asombasi' on the basis of their differing territorial affiliation. But, now, a bond with a re-formed vernacular language was emerging as the most important component of a 'modern' regional identity. It involved the constitution of language as a tangible, material possession that was depicted as transmittable from one generation of its speakers to another, in the manner of a patrimony. The intelligentsia was to regard the very existence of an Assamese jati as dependent upon its mother-tongue acquiring the jatiya ('national') attributes that constituted a language-as-literature. An exploration of vernacular texts has shown how a dominant vocabulary of affect directed towards motherland and mother-tongue served to conceal a range of exclusions and subordinations within the Assamese self that was being fashioned.[3]

Therefore, the dissertation has discussed this period as one that gave rise to processes around the creation of 'Assamese' - a site that would generate endless anxieties, conflicts and contestations of meaning. From the last part of the nineteenth century, an earlier, fluid notion of 'Asombasi' was being redrawn into a new form of 'Assamiya jati'. In theory, this identity embraced all those people who claimed an affiliation to the homeland 'Assam'. But in actual practice, it involved a hierarchical order structured along the interstices of caste, class and gender. The final chapter examined how from the first half of the twentieth century, a variety of 'alternative publics' attempted to challenge the hegemony asserted by the dominant caste intelligentsia. It explored the ways in which local groups were reconfiguring their histories in terms of 'caste' and 'tribe'. The dissertation has suggested that these groups be viewed as politicised communities negotiating around the workings of

---

[3] Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil Nadu, 1891-1970*, Berkeley, 1997.

imperial race science, indigenous status systems and the political and economic structures of colonialism. A shared terrain for these different arenas was their affiliation to the vernacular print culture of Assamese. Another common element was their rhetoric of 'unnati', manifested in campaigns for temperance, education and gender reform. While some features within these 'alternative publics' did tend, even through contestation, to underwrite and extend the notion of 'Assamese', others anticipated the micro-nationalities and insurgencies of the late-twentieth century.

The dissertation explored the popularity achieved by one particular version of Assam's immediate past - that which valorised the Ahom 'history' of Assam. It considered various cultural representations to show how the dominant Assamese public successfully deployed motifs of heroic history to further an ideal of a 'national' space, albeit one that was structured along terms of gender and race. The contemporaneous Maratha exaltation of Shivaji provides a telling comparison in this regard.[4] Finally, it suggested that the different public arenas in Assam retained a predominant male bias, not just in terms of actual participation, but through conceptualising collective status in terms of normative gendered behaviour. From the 1920s, there was the paradox that while women were entering public life in fairly large numbers, a growing linkage of the feminine with the domestic was achieving greater resonance within the trappings of hierarchy and control constructed for the new nation-to-be. Despite a discourse of 'difference' from the 'cow-belt oppression' of women, the political culture of Northeast India has become characterised by its 'boys' holding a monopoly over power.[5]

---

[4] By the 1920s, there was developing the contours of a 'Maratha' historiography that the Assamese historian S.K. Bhuyan constantly referred to in his own creation of a heroic past where Ahom confronted the Mughal aggressor, and where Lachit was the local counterpart of Shivaji. See G.S. Sardesai, *The Main Currents of Maratha History*, Calcutta, 1926, Jadunath Sarkar, *Shivaji and His Times*, Calcutta, 1919 as well as Bhuyan, *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Guwahati, 1947.

[5] Our 'boys' is popular parlance for the university students of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) who organised the 'anti-foreigner' Assam movement of the 1980s and subsequently came to power as the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). Significantly, they often compared themselves to the chatrasamaj of the colonial period. While the AGP has been discredited as a political party riddled with corruption and misgovernment scandals, its mantle of 'youth agitation' has passed onto other organisations representing Bodo, Khasi and Mishing students, as well as its separatist counterpart based in the Brahmaputra valley, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). All these movements are notable for the almost complete absence of women from any leadership positions, as well as their imposition of norms of dress and conduct upon women. In this manner, despite their 'modernistic' and sometimes 'left-wing' rhetoric, they resemble their generational counterparts in Punjab and Kashmir 'nationality' movements.

The dissertation has further examined how the restructuring of boundaries by the colonial state and the embedding of this process within changing political configurations served as the backdrop against which these social identities were being formulated. After the annexation of Assam, the Ahom kingdom and other smaller chiefdoms were ruled as a part of the Bengal Presidency, from 1826 to 1874. Subsequently, Assam was given the status of a Chief Commissioner's province (apart from the years of the Partition of Bengal between 1905 and 1912). The imperatives of British administrative policy determined the institution of two further measures, one joining the Bengal district of Sylhet to Assam, and the other initiating the Inner Line Policy which demarcated the plains and the hills of the region into distinct zones. It was from these measures that have sprung the present-day linguistic, cultural and administrative division of Assam into a predominantly Assamese-speaking Brahmaputra valley, a Bengali-speaking Surma valley and the 'hill' tracts of 'tribals'. As in other parts of India and the wider European colonial world, a complex dialogue had developed between colonial boundaries, older frontiers of homelands and 'patriotisms' and their interaction with changing indigenous notions of linguistic and ethnic difference. These processes have been located in the larger context of the 1920s- a period which both saw the colonial power's attempt to break down Indian politics to the region, and the Congress acknowledgement of the authenticity of indigenous linguistic aspirations.

By the end of colonial rule, the erstwhile British province of Assam had one part of its territory enter East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), while its other territories were incorporated into the Indian Union. Further political changes were to follow over the next half-century, in what was coming to be known as Northeast India. As the final section of the dissertation has shown, the overlapping of various jati affiliations with the 'imagined' community of Assamese had rested upon a fairly fragile consensus on the past and present of Assam's multiethnic landscape. There was already present one potential faultline - the prior claim to national, and its corollary, linguistic belonging, that upper-caste male opinion was arrogating unto itself, as the heir to 'Aryan' status. In the years preceding Independence, this consensus came under severe stress as the political aspirations of the Bengali Muslim constituency in Sylhet and the increasingly

emotive issue of East Bengal peasant migration into the Brahmaputra valley served to bring religion to the forefront as an addition to language. For a while, this served to lessen the preoccupation with race, as a determinant of identity. However, the Partition of 1947 temporarily resolved this issue, with the Muslim-majority districts going to Pakistan, and the remainder becoming the new Indian state of Assam.

The themes developed through this dissertation retain a considerable degree of relevance in post-colonial India. From the 1960s, as issues of federalism came to the fore in the new Indian state, differing views about language policy and access to political representation brought about a decisive parting of the way between the 'hill tribes' and the rest of Assam's population.[6] In the ensuing decades, the political and ideological currents in these seven states have oscillated between a indigenist rhetoric of citizenship rights with a marked animus against 'outsiders', particularly the vast pool of labour coming in from nearby Bangladesh, and a desire to open up linkages with the wider ecological zone of South and Southeast Asia outside India's frontiers. The relationship with the central government at Delhi has been riddled with animosity, with the region's population resenting its exclusion from decision-making and developmental infrastructure. Conversely, successive Indian governments have regarded the 'loyalty' of Northeast India as suspect, due to the long-lived opposition from its nationality movements which have been, more or less, running parallel regimes in many areas, with considerable local support. In some areas, the contending local publics of the late-colonial period have acquired a militarised form, and the state too has responded in a similar manner, with a consequent strain upon democratic politics. This unfortunately is a pattern that many other parts of the world, including other 'new' democracies in Asia and Africa, have revealed.

In this manner, the dissertation has focused upon the fractures, both apparent and potential, that emerged within Assamese self-fashioning. Modern identities, like earlier ones, exhibit many ambiguities, but the difference lies in the formers' need to find a place within a comprehensive intellectual framework that sharpens ambiguities,

---

[6] Ultimately, these have become the seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura.

and thereby, becomes more difficult to accommodate. Moreover, the stakes of political conflict are higher in the polities of the present day. In contrast to an earlier quest for fictive kinship with a larger Hindu community of the Indian hinterland, the Bodo movement of the late-twentieth century has come to centre its national ideology around an autochthonous claim to the land of Assam. While the hegemony acquired by caste Hindu Assamese society has led to a 'tribal' group's quest for a separate identity and territory, it is the political machinery of a putative Indian federalism that has assisted in making such aspirations more concrete. Ironically, movements contesting the inequities within the 'nation-state' have adopted a similar strategy of seeking cultural hegemony over other groups within the spatial boundaries they claim for their new 'nation'.

It can be argued that the ideological and political practices initiated by the local intelligentsia and the colonial state laid the basis for an influential and exclusionist model of Assamiya nationalism which in turn, caused equally chauvinistic forms of nationality assertion coming to the fore among other groups in Northeast India. However, the violent and segregationist contours taken by these movements have to be viewed in a broader perspective, as pointers to the very real failure of a mechanical variant of a modern nation-state to sustain the various overlapping identities and desires for self-respect nurtured by its citizens. Again, it has to be borne in mind that another even larger structure has exacerbated the troubled modernity of such regions. This is the globalised marketplace, which has ensured that the extractive economy of Assam, based on tea, timber and oil, continues in a not very different form from its colonial antecedents, into the twenty-first century. It is when such a wider perspective can be taken that this dissertation can hope to have cast some light upon the 'insurgencies' that have become synonymous with Northeast India. Such movements have to be viewed not as eruptions of primordial ethnic strife but as a modern phenomenon – a ground-level quest to 'rescue history' (and perhaps a future) from the grip of the nation. By a supreme irony, of course, the ideology of the nation-state still holds such a grip on human imaginations that even those who contest it, express themselves in its guise. It may well be that 'a national history can be properly understood only when seen in relation to other national histories, and even more so, to non-national histories cutting across the constantly moving borderlines between

various communities...'[7] Perhaps this is where the historian can hope to intervene, to rescue locality and region from the occlusion they have suffered by their assimilation into the nation and the area-study.

[7] See Stein Tonnesson and Hans Antlov ed., *Asian Forms of the Nation*, Richmond, 1996, p.18.

Glossary

ahu - short-maturing rice, suitable for dry farming.

amla – agent (also omlah).

anna – a monetary unit, with sixteen annas to one rupee.

arkatti - village recruiter.

babu – a term used to refer to an Indian who had some connection with the British, either through being in the colonial regime's service and/or wearing Westernised attire. Used as a honorific for 'educated' Indians, but also comes to become term of ridicule for the Anglo-Indian press.

baganiyas - garden people - a term used for the coolie population of Assam came to be given, as they were integrated into local society.

Bailung – Ahom priest.

bandi/beti – categories of servile labour, usually deployed within the household economy.

Bangal – until the mid-nineteenth century, referred to any foreigner, irrespective of ethnicity; after that period, used more narrowly to refer to an inhabitant of Bengal, specially of the East Bengal districts.

bari – garden.

barkandazi – military mercenary, from Eastern and North India.

Barua – an Ahom official, with jurisdiction over a department of state or a *khel* of people, with the prefix to this term indicating his responsibility, such as Hathi Barua, i.e the official in charge of the royal elephants. Gradually, in use across the population, as a surname, with the previously used prefixes discarded as cumbersome and old-fashioned.

bhaal manuh – respectable (lit. good man).

bhakat – monastic acolyte attached to the *satras*.

bhakti – devotion to god.

bhasha – language, usually referring to the commonly spoken vernacular. With matri ('mother') as prefix, a new usage from the mid-nineteenth century, of mother-tongue.

bigha - one third of an acre.

brahmottar - revenue free grants to Brahmins.

buranji – chronicle, (lit. 'store of knowledge'); in the nineteenth century, used to denote history, either as text or discipline.

carit-puthi - devotional hagiographies, usually produced in the satras.

chakri – clerical job, with connotations of drudgery.

Daivagna – astrologer caste, which had been able to use the patronage from the Ahom court to claim a status close to Brahmins in the ritual hierarchy, which however, was contested by other ambitious groups such as the Kalita.

dangariya - an Ahom noble; its meaning was extended to mean anyone of high status, not a commoner.

desh – homeland or country.

devottar - revenue free grants to temples or 'devalays'.

Dharma – moral or religious path.

dubhashi – lit. one who had two languages or bhashas, used here to refer to those members of the precolonial service gentry who mediated between that world and the British, and made strategic use of a number of linguistic idioms in the process.

durbar – a court or levee.

eri – a local silk, of a rough, heavy texture, which was used as an outer garment in cold weather by all social groups, but particularly the poorer classes.

gohain - an Ahom aristocrat.

gyati – kin.

haat - a weekly or bi-weekly market serving a village or a group of villages.

jat – endogamous caste grouping, also used here to refer to a species.

jati – different uses in a context of community, from caste to ethnie to nation.

jatiya – national.

Kalita - a peasant caste with high status. Its higher groups, given the prefix Bor ('big') had acquired high service rank under the later Ahoms.

kaniya - opium eater, from 'kani' or 'opium'.

keya – local term for a Marwari trader.

khel – population unit in Ahom state, on basis of occupation.

khiraj - full revenue paying land.

kotha - tale.

Kunwari – sometimes used to denote Aideo or 'princess', but actually, referring to any aristocratic woman in the Ahom period.

la-khiraj - land exempt from paying revenue.

maund – a unit of weight, varying from province to province, but usually 36 kilograms in Bengal.

mel - an assembly of people gathered for a common purpose.

mess - rooms rented by a group of students, usually from the same district or province, with a common kitchen.

mohurir -clerical or field supervisors in government courts and offices, or on plantations.

mouza - villages grouped into a unit for revenue purposes.

mouzadar - revenue collector in charge of the mouza on a commission basis.

muga - a silk with a golden sheen.

namoni - lower (as in Lower Assam).

nisf-khiraj - land paying revenue at half the usual rate.

paik - a peasant, subject to service obligations towards the Ahom state at fixed periods in the year.

parbatiya - pertaining to parbat('hill').

pathsala – village primary school.

Phukan – an official who was the superintendent of a khel during the Ahom period, with a jurisdiction upto 6000 people. Later, this too, like Barua, used as a surname. Usually confined to Brahmins and Ahoms.

Puranas – texts comprising traditions, myths, legends and rites (lit. ancient stories).

raij- public, or the subjects of the raja.

ryot – peasant (also raiyat).

rupit - land suitable for growing transplanted rice.

sabha – meeting or association.

sabhya – civilised; a/sabhya' is used as its antonym, and 'sabhyata' as the noun form.

Sadar Amin –with *Munsifs*, they made up the so-called 'native judges', with limited jurisdiction over cases of petty thefts and other matters referred to them by their superiors in Assam, they had much less power nor emolument compared to their counterparts in Bengal. An Assam Munsif drawing a personal salary of Rs 80 a month (Rs 20 less than a first grade one in Bengal) was not competent under Assam Rules to try civil cases above Rs 100 and a Sadar-Amin who had jurisdiction over cases above Rs 100 received Rs 150 a month.

sadharan - ordinary.

sahitya - literature.

sali - long-maturing 'wet' rice needing transplantation.

satra - a Vaishvavite monastery in Assam, typically with lands attached to it.

Satradhikar - head of a Satra, often known as Gosain or Mahanta, if a non-Brahmin.

seristadar – a registrar or record keeper, especially head Indian officer of a court or collector's office in charge of public records and official documents.

shish - lay disciple of the Gosains.

Swargadeo - lord of heaven, a title used by the Ahom kings.

tehsildar – a revenue official at the tehsil level, below the district.

tithi – commemorative anniversary.

ujani - upper (as in Upper Assam).

unnati - progress.

utsav - festival.

Bibliography

Sources in English

Unpublished

Private Papers

British Library, London

Auckland Papers, Addl. Mss. 37689-37718.

Carnegie Papers, OIOC Mss Eur. D 682.

Francis Buchanan Hamilton Papers, OIOC Mss Eur. K 156-75.

Francis Fowke Papers, OIOC Mss Eur. C 767.

Francis Jenkins Papers, OIOC Mss Eur. F 257.

Joseph Banks Memorial on Tea, OIOC Mss Eur. D 993.

Note on John Peter Wade, Mss Eur. D 501.

Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati

Jenkins, Francis, "Journals of a Tour of Upper Assam," 1838.

Jenkins, "Report on the Revenue Administration of the Province of Assam," 1849-50.

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi

Jyotiprasad Agarwala Papers.

North Eastern Hill University, Shillong

Miles Bronson Papers (Microfilm).

Manuscript Sources

Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library, London

Bengal Revenue Proceedings.

Bengal Judicial Proceedings.

Bengal Political Consultations.

Board's Collection.
Court of Directors' Letters to Bengal.
Fort William Revenue Proceedings.

National Archives of India, New Delhi

Emigration Proceedings.
Foreign Political Consultations.
Foreign Secret Consultations.
Home Public Proceedings.
Home Revenue Proceedings.
Revenue and Agriculture Proceedings.

West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta

Papers of the General Committee for Public Instruction in the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency, 1835-68.

Assam State Archives, Guwahati

Assam Secretariat Files.
File of Contemporary Newspaper Cuttings.
Letters issued to Government, Assam State Archives.
Letters received from Government, Assam Secretariat Files.
Letters received from Government (Foreign Department), Assam Secretariat Files.
Miscellaneous letters, Judicial, Assam State Archives.

District Record Office, Jorhat

Agriculture and Revenue Records and Letters.
Tour Diaries of Deputy Commissioners.

Published

Official Publications

Allen, B.C. ed., *Assam District Gazetteers*, Calcutta and Allahabad, 1905-14.
Allen, B.C., *Census of India, 1901*: Vol. 4: Assam: Part 1, *Report*, Shillong, 1902.

Allen, B.C., E.A. Gait, C.G.H. Allen, H.F. Howard, *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam*, Calcutta, 1911 (reprint Delhi, 1993).

Annual Reports on the Land Revenue Administration, Shillong, 1874-1936.

Assam Administrative Reports, Annual Series, Shillong, 1874-1936.

Assam Company Report of Local Directors to Shareholders at a General Meeting, Calcutta, 1841.

Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906, Calcutta, 1906.

Assam Mission Third Triennial Conference Report, Nowgong, 1893.

Assam Valley Re-assessment Report, Shillong, 1893.

Beverley, H., *Report on the Census of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1872.

Gait, E.A., *Census of India, 1891*: Assam: Part 1, *Report*, Shillong, 1892.

General Reports on Public Instruction in Assam, Shillong, 1875-1936.

Land Revenue Administration Report of Assam Valley Districts, 1884-5, Shillong, 1885.

Lloyd, G.T., *Census of India, 1921*: Vol. 3: Assam: Part 1, *Report*, Shillong, 1923.

McSwiney, J., *Census of India, 1911*: Vol. 3: Assam: Part 1, *Report*, Shillong, 1912.

Mills, A.J. Moffat, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1854 (reprint Guwahati, 1982).

Mullen, C.S., *Census of India, 1931*: Vol. 3: Assam: Part 1, *Report*, Shillong, 1932.

Papers Relating to Tea Cultivation in Assam, Calcutta, 1861.

Report of Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-30, Shillong, 1930.

Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council, 1912-1936. (The council was the only provincial legislature until then, and the second chamber after that).

Report of the Commissioners on the Tea Cultivation of Assam, 1868: Papers relating to the Tea Industry of Bengal, Calcutta, 1873.

Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into Certain Aspects of Opium and Ganja Consumption (Botham Committee) Shillong, 1913.

Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into Certain Aspects of Opium and Ganja Consumption (Nichols-Roy Committee) Shillong, 1933.

Report of the Labour Enquiry Commission of Bengal, Calcutta, 1896.

Report on Native Papers of the Bengal Presidency, Calcutta.

Report on the Census of Assam for 1881, Calcutta, 1883.

Royal Commission on Labour in India, *Written Evidence*, Vol. 6 - Part 1, London, 1930.

Royal Commission on Opium, *Report and Minutes of Evidence*, Vols. 1-7, London, 1894.

Parliamentary Papers, Britain

PP 1839: *Papers Relating to Measures for Introducing Cultivation of Tea Plant in British Possessions in India*, Vol. XXXIX, Paper 63.

PP 1841: *Papers on Slavery in the East Indies*, Vol. XXXVIII, Paper 238.

Sessional Papers of the House of Commons, 1895, XLII, *Final Report of the Royal Commission on Opium.*

Published Works until c.1950

Adam, William, *Queries and Replies Respecting the Present State of the Protestant Missions in Bengal*, 1824.

Barker, George, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, Calcutta, 1884.

Barpujari, H.K. ed., *An Account of Assam and Her Administration*, Guwahati, 1988.

Barpujari, H.K ed., *The American Missionaries in Northeast India: 1836-1900, A Documentary Study*, Guwahati, 1986.

Bezbarua, Lakshminath, *History of Vaishnavism in India and Rasalila of Shri Krishna: the Baroda Lectures*, Calcutta, 1934.

Bhuyan, S.K., *Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771-1826*, Guwahati, 1949.

Bhuyan, S.K., *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Guwahati, 1947.

Bronson, Miles, *A Dictionary in Assamese and English*, Sibsagar, 1867.

Buchanan Hamilton, Francis, *A Journey from Madras through Mysore*, 3 volumes, London, 1807.

Buchanan Hamilton, Francis, *An Account of Assam*, London, 1820 (reprint Guwahati, 1963).

Buckingham, James, *An Account of the Burman Empire, and of the Kingdom of Assam*, Calcutta, 1830.

Butler, John, A *Sketch of Assam by an Officer in the Hon. East India Company's Bengal Native Infantry*, London, 1847.

Butler, John, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam during a Residence of Fourteen Years*, London, 1855.

Chatterji, Suniti Kumar, *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*, 2 volumes, London, 1926.

Chaudhuri, K.N. ed., *The Economic Development of India, 1814-1858: A Selection of Contemporary Writings*, Cambridge, 1971.

Coke Burnell, Arthur, and Henry Yule, *Hobson-Jobson; a Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases*, London, 1883 (reprint 1903).

Cotton, H.J., *Indian and Home Memories*, London, 1911.

Dalton, E.T., *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1872.

Elwin, Verrier ed., *India's Northeast Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, Bombay, 1959.

Endle, Sidney, *The Kacharis*, London, 1911.

Fortune, Robert, *A Journey to the Countries of China*, London, 1852.

Fuller, Bampfylde J., *Some Personal Experiences*, London, 1930.

Furnivall, J.S., *An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma*, Rangoon, 1931.

Gait, E.A. *A History of Assam*, London, 1906.

Gait, E.A., *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam*, Shillong, 1897.

Ganguli, Dwarkanath, *Slavery in British Dominion* (a collection of thirteen articles first published in the Bengalee, Sept 1886 to April 1887), Calcutta, 1972.

Ghose, Benoy ed., *Selections from English Periodicals of 19th Century Bengal*, 8 volumes, Calcutta, 1978.

Goswami, Hem Chandra and Padmadhar Gohain Barua in *A Note on Assamese Language and Literature*, Calcutta, 1907

Grierson, George A., *Linguistic Survey of India*, 11 volumes, Government of India, 1927.

Griffith, William, *Journal of Travels in Assam, Burma, Bootan, Afghanistan and the neighbouring countries by the late William Griffith, arranged by John M'Clelland*, Calcutta, 1847-48.

Griffith, William, *Report on the Tea Plant of Upper Assam*, Calcutta, 1840.

Gurdon, P.R.T., ed., *Assamese Proverbs*, Shillong, 1920.

Hodgson, Brian Houghton, *Miscellaneous Essays Relating to Indian Subjects*, 2 volumes, London, 1880.

Hunter, W.W., *A Statistical Account of Assam*, 2 volumes, London, 1879.

Hunter, W.W., *Life of Lord Mayo*, London,1876.

Hutton, J.H., *The Angami Nagas, with Some Notes on Neighbouring Tribes*, London, 1921.

Kaye, J.W. and J. Forbes Watson ed., *People of India*, 2 volumes, London, 1868.

Lyall, Charles, *The Mikirs, from the Papers of the Late Edward Stack*, London, 1908.

MacCosh, John, *Topography of Assam*, London, 1837.

Mackenzie, Alexander, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the Northeast Frontier of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1884.

Medhi, Kaliram, *Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese Language*, Guwahati, 1934 (reprint, 1988).

Mills, J.P., *The Ao Nagas*, London, 1926.

Neog, Maheswar, ed., *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language*, Calcutta, 1855 (reprint Guwahati, 1959).

Pal, Bipan Chandra, *Memories of My Life and Times*, Calcutta,1932 (reprint 1973).

Playfair, A., *The Garos*, London, 1909.

Raffles, Thomas Stamford, *History of Java*, 2 volumes, London, 1817.

Ramsden, A.R., *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle*, London, 1944.

Ray Choudhuri, Subir, *Early History and Growth of Calcutta*, Calcutta, 1905.

Risley, Herbert, *People of India*, 2 volumes, Calcutta, 1908.

Robinson, William, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, Calcutta, 1841.

Sardesai, G.S., *The Main Currents of Maratha History*, Calcutta, 1926.

Sarkar, Jadunath, *Shivaji and his Times*, Calcutta, 1919.

Sarma, Benudhar, ed., *An Account of Assam, 1800 by John Peter Wade*, North Lakhimpur, 1927.

White, Adam, ed., *A Memoir of the Late David Scott*, Calcutta, 1832.

Wilson, H.H, *Documents Relating to the Burmese War*, Calcutta, 1827.

Wilson, H.H., *The History of British India from 1805 to 1835*, London, 1858 (reprint 1997).

Published Works after c.1950

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 1991.

Antrobus, H.A., *A History of Assam Company, 1839-1953*, Edinburgh, 1957.

Arnold, David, *A New Cambridge History of India: Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India*, Cambridge, 2000.

Baak, Paul Erik, *Plantations, Production and Political Power*, Delhi, 1997.

Bagchi, Amiyo K., *Private Investment in India 1900-39*, Cambridge, 1974.

Baker, C.J., and David Washbrook ed., *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change, 1880-1940*, Delhi, 1975.

Ballantyne, Tony, *Orientalism and Race*, Hampshire, 2002.

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*, Calcutta, 1990.

Banerjee, Mukulika, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the North West Frontier*, London, 2000.

Barpujari, H.K. ed., *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, 5 volumes, Guwahati, 1992.

Barua, Birinchi Kumar, *History of Assamese Literature*, New Delhi, 1964.

Baruah, Anjan Kumar, *Assamese Businessmen from Maniram Dewan to Robin Dutta*, Guwahati, 1992.

Baruah, Sanjib, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Pennsylvania, 1999.

Bayly, C.A., *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge, 1996.

Bayly, C.A., *Imperial Meridian: the British Empire and the World, 1780-1830*, London, 1989.

Bayly, C.A., *Origins of Nationality in South Asia*, Delhi, 1998.

Bayly, C.A., *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870*, Cambridge, 1996.

Bayly, C.A., *The Local Roots of Indian Politics: Allahabad, 1880-1920*, Cambridge, 1975.

Bhattacharya, Bhabani, *Socio-Political Currents in Bengal*, New Delhi, 1980.

Bhuyan, S.K., *Studies in the History of Assam*, Guwahati, 1965.

Billig, Michael, *Banal Nationalism*, London, 1995.

Biswas, Kalipada, *The Original Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks Relating to the Foundation of the Royal Botanic Gardens*, Calcutta, 1950.

Borra, J.N., *Bolinarayan Bora: His Life, Work and Musings*, Calcutta, 1967.

Bose, Sugata and Ayesha Jalal ed. *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*, London, 1997.

Breman, Jan, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial Order in Southeast Asia*, Delhi, 1989.

Burke, Peter, and Roy Porter ed., *Languages and Jargons*, Cambridge, 1995.

Calhoun, Craig ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992.

Chakravarti, Ramakant, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1985.

Chakravarti, Uma, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, New Delhi, 1998.

Chatterjee P.C. ed., *Self-Images, Identity and Nationality*, New Delhi, 1989.

Champakalakshmi, R. and S. Gopal ed., *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology: Essays in Honour of Romila Thapar*, Delhi, 1996.

Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics*, Cambridge, 1998.

Chandra, Sudhir, *The Oppressive Present: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1992.

Chartier, Roger, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, tr. Lydia G. Cochrane, Cambridge, 1988.

Chatterjee, Indrani, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India*, New Delhi, 1999.

Chatterjee, Partha, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, London, 1986.

Chatterjee, Partha and Gyanendra Pandey ed., *Subaltern Studies VII*, Delhi, 1992.

Chatterjee, Partha, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Delhi, 1994.

Chaturvedi, Vinayak, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, London, 2000.

Choudhury, Iswar Prasad, *Jyotiprasad Agarwala*, New Delhi, 1986.

Chowdhuri, Indira, *The Frail Hero and Virile History,* New Delhi, 1999.

Cohn, Bernard S., *An Anthropologist among the Historians*, London, 1985.

Copley, Anthony, *Religions in Conflict: Ideology, Cultural Contact and Conversion in Late Colonial India*, Delhi, 1997.

Corfield, Penelope ed., *Language, History and Class*, Oxford, 1991.

Coward, Rosalind, *Female Desire, Women's Sexuality Today*, London, 1984.

Dalmia, Vasudha, *The Nationalisation of Hindu Traditions*, Delhi, 1997.

Daniel, E. Valentine, Henry Bernstein and Tom Brass ed., *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, London, 1992.

Dev, Bimal J. and Dilip Lahiri, *Cosmogony of Caste and Social Mobility in Assam*, Delhi, 1984.

Dev Goswami, Kesavananda, *Post Sankardeva Vaisnava Faith and Culture of Assam*, Delhi, 1988.

Dirks, Nicholas B., *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Yale, 2001.

Downs, F.S., *The Mighty Works of God*, Guwahati, 1969.

Drayton, Richard, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain and the 'Improvement' of the World*, Yale, 2000.

Dutta, Arup Kumar, *The Khongiya Baruahs of Thengal*, Guwahati, 1990.

Duara, Prasenjit, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, Chicago, 1995.

Eaton, Richard, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760*, Berkeley, 1993.

Eco, Umberto, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, Cambridge, 1995.

Engels, Dagmar and Shula Marks ed., *Contesting Colonial Hegemony*, London, 1994.

Fabian, Johannes, *Language and Colonial Power*, Cambridge, 1986.

Forrester, Duncan B., *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*, London, 1980.

Fox, Richard G. ed., *Realm and Region in Traditional India*, New Delhi, 1977.

Fox Young, Richard, *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India*, Vienna, 1981.

Freitag, Sandria B., *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India*, Berkeley, 1989.

Gallagher, John, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal ed., *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics, 1870-1940*, Cambridge, 1973.

Gellner, Ernest, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, 1983.

Gordon, Stewart, *The New Cambridge History of India: The Marathas, 1600-1818*, Cambridge, 1993.

Greenfeld, Liah, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992.

Goswami, J.N., *Hemchandra Barua*, New Delhi, 1987.

Goswami, Prafulladatta, *Ballads and Tales of Assam*, Guwahati, 1960.

Goswami, Prafulladatta, *Bihu Songs of Assam*, Guwahati, 1988.

Goswami, Prafulladatta, *Tribal Folk-Tales of Assam*, Guwahati, 1955.

Grove, Richard H., Vinita Damodaran and Satpal Sangwan ed., *Nature and the Orient*, Delhi, 1998.

Guha, Amalendu, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, Calcutta, 1985.

Guha, Amalendu, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, New Delhi, 1977.

Guha, Ranajit, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Cambridge, Mass., 1997.

Guha, Sumit, *Environment and Ethnicity in India: 1200-1991*, Cambridge, 1999.

Habermas, Jurgen, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, tr. T. Burger, Cambridge, Mass., 1992.

Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger ed., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983.

Hobsbawm, Eric, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge, 1990.

Irschick, Eugene, *Dialogue in History: Constructing South India*, Berkeley, 1994.

Juergensmeyer, Mark, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in Twentieth Century Punjab*, Berkeley, 1982.

Kaviraj, Sudipta, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*, Delhi, 1996.

Kaye, Harvey J., and Keith McClelland ed., *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, Philadelphia, 1990.

King, Christopher R., *One Language, Two Scripts*, Delhi, 1994.

Kling, Blair B., *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India*, Berkeley, 1976.

Kolff, Dirk H.A., *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethno-History of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850*, Cambridge, 1990.

Kooiman, Dick, *Conversion and Social Equality*, Amsterdam,1989.

Kothari, Rajni ed., *Caste in Indian Politics*, New Delhi, 1970.

Kulke, Hermann, *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia*, New Delhi, 1993.

Leach, Edmund, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, London, 1954 (reprint 2001).

Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *The Savage Mind*, London, 1972.

Mackenzie, John M. ed., *Imperialism and the Natural World*, Manchester, 1990.

McGuire, John, *The Making of a Colonial Mind*, Canberra, 1983.

Meehan, Johanna ed., *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, New York, 1995.

Messerschmidt, Donald A., *The Gurungs of Nepal: Conflict and Change in a Village*, Warminder, 1976.

Metcalf, Thomas R., *A New Cambridge History of India: Ideologies of the Raj*, Cambridge, 1995.

Milner, Anthony, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, Cambridge, 1995.

Misra, B.B., *The Unification and Division of India*, Delhi, 1990.

Misra, Tilottama, *Literature and Society in Assam*, Delhi, 1987.

Misra, Udayan, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*, Shimla, 2000.

Mohanty, Nivedita, *Oriya Nationalism*, New Delhi, 1982.

Myint-U, Thant, *The Making of Modern Burma*, Cambridge, 2001.

Neog, Maheswar ed., *Lakshminath Bezbarua: the Sahityarathi of Assam*, Guwahati, 1972.

Neog, Maheswar, *Socio-Political Events in Assam leading to the Militancy of the Mayamariya Vaishnavas*, Calcutta, 1982.

O' Hanlon, Rosalind, *A Comparison between Men and Women: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India*, Madras, 1994.

O' Hanlon, Rosalind, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*, Cambridge, 1985.

Ong, Walter, *Orality and Literacy*, London, 1982.

Orsini, Francesca, *The Hindi Public Sphere: 1920-40*, New Delhi, 2002.

Porter, Andrew ed., *The Nineteenth Century: The Oxford History of the British Empire*, London, 1999.

Rafael, Vicente L., *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule*, Ithaca, 1988.

Ramaswamy, Sumathi, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil Nadu, 1891-1970*, Berkeley, 1997.

Ray, Rajat Kanta ed., *Mind, Body and Society*, Delhi, 1995.

Robb, Peter, ed., *Dalit Movements and the Meaning of Labour in India*, Oxford, 1993.

Rosaldo, Michelle Zimbalist and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture and Society*, Berkeley, 1974.

Saikia, Rajen, *Social and Economic History of Assam*, Delhi, 2001.

Saikia, Sayeeda Yasmin, *In the Meadows of Gold*, Delhi, 1997.

Sangari, Kumkum and Sudesh Vaid, ed., *Recasting Women* , Delhi, 1989.

Sarkar, Sumit, *Writing Social History*, Delhi, 1997.

Sarkar, Tanika, *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban: A Modern Autobiography*, New Delhi, 1999.

Sarma, Satyendra Nath, *Assamese Literature*, Wiesbaden, 1976.

Sarma, Satyendra Nath, *Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*, Guwahati, 1966.

Saunders, Kay ed., *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834-1920*, London and Canberra, 1984.

Seton-Watson, Hugh, *Nations and States: an Inquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism*, Boulder, 1977.

Sharma, Manorama, *Social and Economic Change in Assam*, Delhi, 1990.

Sinha, Mrinalini, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Manchester, 1995.

Skaria, Ajay, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, New Delhi, 1999.

Smith, Anthony D., *Theories of Nationalism*, New York, 1983.

Srinivas, M.N., *The Cohesive Role of Sanskritisation and Other Essays*, New Delhi, 1989.

Stoler, Ann Laura, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt 1870-1979*, Yale, 1985.

Thapar, Romila, *Clan, Caste and Origin Myths in Early India*, Shimla, 1992.

Timberg, Thomas A., *The Marwaris: from Traders to Industrialists*, New Delhi, 1978.

Tinker, Hugh, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920*, London, 1993.

Tonnesson, Stein and Hans Antlov ed., *Asian Forms of the Nation*, Richmond, 1996.

Trautmann, Thomas, *Aryans and British India*, Berkeley, 1997.

Vansina, Jan, *Oral Tradition as History*, London, 1985.

Wolf, Eric R., *Europe and the People without History*, Berkeley, 1982.

Winks, Robin W. ed., *Historiography: The Oxford History of the British Empire*, London, 1999.

Wyatt, David, *Studies in Thai History*, Chiang Mai, 1994.

Young, Robert J.C., *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*, London, 1995.

Articles from Periodicals and Anthologies

"Annual Meeting of Assam Mission, 1850," Baptist Missionary Magazine, May 1852.

"Annual Report, Assam, 1838," Baptist Missionary Magazine, December 1839.

"Assamese Literature: Communicated by Geo. A. Grierson," Indian Antiquary, March 1896.

"Institution of a Horticultural Society," in The Calcutta Monthly Journal, 24 June 1816, reprinted in Benoy Ghose ed., *Selections from English Periodicals of 19th Century Bengal*, Vol. 1, Calcutta, 1978, p.3.

Banerjee, A.C., "The New Regime: 1826-1931," in H.K. Barpujari ed., *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. 4, Guwahati, 1992, pp.1-27.

Barooah, Nirode K., "David Scott and the Question of Slavery in Assam: A Case Study in British Paternalism," Indian Economic and Social History Review, (2), June, 1969, pp.179-96.

Barpujari, H.K., "Re-assessment and Agrarian Riots, " in H.K Barpujari ed. *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. 5, Guwahati, 1992, pp.21-36.

Baruah, Sanjib, "Clash of Resource Use Regimes in Colonial Assam: A Nineteenth-Century Puzzle Revisited", Journal of Peasant Studies, 28, (3), April 2001, pp.109-24.

Bayly, C.A., "The Second British Empire," in Robin W. Winks ed., *Historiography: The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Oxford, 1999, pp.54-72.

Bayly, Susan, "Caste and 'Race' in the Colonial Ethnography of India," in Peter Robb ed., *The Concept of Race in India*, Delhi, 1995, pp.165-218.

Behl, R.P. and P. Mohapatra, " 'Tea and Money versus Human Life': the Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations: 1840-1908," in E. Valentine Daniel, Henry Bernstein, Tom Brass ed., *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, London, 1992, pp.142-72.

Berwick, John, "Chatra Samaj: The Significance of the Student Community in Bengal c.1870-1922," in Rajat Kanta Ray ed., *Mind, Body and Society*, Delhi, 1995, pp.232-86.

Bhuyan, S.K., "Sources of Assam History", in Bulletin II of the D.H.A.S., February 23, 1924.

Brown, Rev. Nathan, "Alphabets of the Tai language," No. 61, January 1837, Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, pp.17-21.

Brown, Rev. Nathan, "Comparison of Indo-Chinese Languages," in Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, No.63, December 1837, p.1023-37.

Bur Bhandaree Barrooa, Muneeram, "On the Mezangurree silk of Assam and plants whereof the worm feeds," Transactions of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India, Vol. 7, 1840.

Bur Bhandaree, Moneeram Revenue Saristadar, "Native Account of Washing for Gold in Assam," (Communicated by Captain Jenkins to the Coal and Mineral Committee), Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, No.79, July 1838, pp.621-25.

Burroughs, Peter, "Imperial Institutions and the Governance of Empire," in Andrew Porter, Andrew ed., *The Nineteenth Century: The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Oxford, 1999, pp.170-97.

Campbell, George, "The Ethnology of India," Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Supplementary Number, Vol. 30, Part 2.

Carroll, Lucy, "Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations," in The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 37, (2), February 1978, pp.233-50.

Chakrabarti, Kunal, "Texts and Traditions; The Making of the Bengal Puranas," in Champakalakshmi, R. and S. Gopal ed., *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology: Essays in Honour of Romila Thapar*, Delhi, 1996, pp.55-88.

Cohn, Bernard S. "Representing Authority in Victorian India," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger ed., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983, pp.165-210.

Das Gupta, Ranajit, "Plantation Labour in Colonial India," in E. Valentine Daniel, Henry Bernstein and Tom Brass ed., *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia,* London, 1992, pp.172-99.

de Groot, Joanna, "'Sex' and 'Race': the Construction of Language and Empire in the Nineteenth century," in Catherine Hall ed., *Cultures of Empire*, Manchester, 2000, pp.37-60.

Eley, Geoff, "Nations, Publics and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in Craig Calhoun ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992, pp. 289-339.

Embree, Ainslie T., "Frontiers into Boundaries: From the Traditional to the Modern State," in Richard G. Fox ed., *Realm and Region in Traditional India*, New Delhi, 1977, pp.255-80.

Etherington, Norman, "Missions and Empire," in Robin W. Winks ed., *Historiography: The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Oxford, 1999, pp.303-14.

Forbes, Geraldine, "Managing Midwifery in India," in Dagmar Engels and Shula Marks ed., *Contesting Colonial Hegemony*, London, 1994, pp.152-72.

Fraser, Nancy, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in Craig Calhoun ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992, pp. 109-42.

Ghosh, Kaushik, "A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India," in *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. X, ed. Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu, New Delhi, 1999, pp.8-48.

Gooptu, Nandini, "Caste, Deprivation and Politics: the Untouchables in U.P. towns in the early twentieth century," in Peter Robb ed., *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour*," Delhi, 1994, pp.277-98.

Goswami, Sarat Chandra, "The Night-Worshippers of Assam," Journal of the Assam Research Society, 1929.

Grove, Richard H., "Colonial Conservation, Ecological Hegemony and Popular Resistance: towards a Global Synthesis" in John M. MacKenzie, ed., *Imperialism and the Natural World*, Manchester, 1990, pp.15-50.

Guha, Amalendu, " 'A Big Push Without A Take-Off: A Case-Study of Assam: 1871-1901': Reply to Comment," Indian Economic and Social History Review, (4), December 1974, pp.474-9.

Guha, Amalendu, "The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into State Formation in Medieval Assam: 1228-1714," Social Scientist, December 1983, pp.3-34.

Guha, Amalendu, "The Moamoria Revolution: Was it a Class War?" The Assam Tribune, 18 October 1950.

Hodgson, Brian Houghton, "On the Origin, Location, Numbers, Creed, Customs, Character and Condition of the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal People with a general description of the climate they dwell in," in *Miscellaneous Essays Relating to Indian Subjects*, 2 volumes, London, 1880, Vol. 1, Section I, (first printed in Calcutta, 1847), pp.1-160.

Kaviraj, Sudipta, "Imaginary History: Narrativising of the Nation in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay," in P.C. Chatterjee ed., *Self-Images, Identity and Nationality*, New Delhi, 1989.

Kaviraj, Sudipta, "The Imaginary Institution of India," in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey ed., *Subaltern Studies VII*, Delhi, 1992, pp.1-39.

Kumar, Deepak, "The Evolution of Colonial Science in India", in John M. MacKenzie ed., *Imperialism and the Natural World*, Manchester, 1990, pp.51-66.

Leopold, Joan, "The Aryan Theory of Race, 1870-1920: Nationalist and Internationalist Visions," Indian Economic and Social History Review, (2), June 1970, pp.271-98.

Lynn, Martin, "British Policy, Trade and Informal Empire in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," in Andrew Porter ed., *The Nineteenth Century: The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Oxford, 1999, pp.101-21.

Macdonald, Ellen E., "The Growth of Regional Consciousness in Maharashtra," Indian Economic and Social History Review, (3), September 1968, pp.233-44.

Majeed, Javed, "'The Jargon of Indostan': An Exploration of Jargon in Urdu and East Company English," in Peter Burke and Roy Porter ed., *Languages and Jargons*, Cambridge, 1995, pp.182-205.

Meyer, Eric, "'Enclave' Plantations, 'Hemmed-In' Villages and Dualistic Representations in Colonial Ceylon," in E. Valentine Daniel, Henry Bernstein and Tom Brass ed., *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, London, 1992, pp.199-228.

Morris-Suzuki, Tessa, "The Frontiers of Japanese Identity," in Stein Tonnesson and Hans Antlov ed., *Asian Forms of the Nation*, Richmond, 1996, pp.41-66.

Morton, Rev. W., "Remarks on A 'Comparison of Indo-Chinese Languages'," in Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, No. 73, January 1838, pp.56-64.

Mukherjee, S.N., "Class, Caste and Politics in Calcutta, 1815-38," in Edmund Leach and S.N. Mukherjee ed., *Elites in South Asia*, Cambridge, 1970, pp.33-78.

Mukherjee, Sibsankar, "The Social Role of a Caste Association," Indian Economic and Social History Review, 31, (1), January-March 1994, pp. 89-100.

Naregal, Veena, "Language and Power in Precolonial Western India; Textual Hierarchies, Literate Audiences and Colonial Philology", Indian Economic and Social History Review, 37, (3), 2000, pp.259-94.

O'Connor, Richard A., "Agricultural Change and Ethnic Succession in Southeast Asian States: A Case for Regional Anthropology," in The Journal of Asian Studies, 54 (4), November 1995, pp.968-96.

Pati, Biswamoy, "The 'High': 'Low' Dialectic in Fakirmohana's *Chamana Athaguntha*: Popular Culture, Literature and Society in Late Nineteenth Century Orissa," Research in Progress Papers, "History and Society", 2nd series, No. LXIX, NMML, New Delhi, 1993.

Pollock, Sheldon, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular", The Journal of Asian Studies, 57, (1), February 1988, pp.6-37.

"Report of the American Baptist Mission to Assam, 1845," Baptist Missionary Magazine, August 1846.

Robb, Peter, "The Colonial State and Constructions of Indian Identity: An example on the Northeast Frontier in the 1880s," Modern Asian Studies, 31 (2), 1997, pp.245-83.

Rogers, John D., "Post-Orientalism and the Interpretation of Premodern and Modern Political Identities: The Case of Sri Lanka," The Journal of Asian Studies, 53 (1), February 1994, pp.10-23.

Rosaldo, Michelle Zimbalist, ""Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview," in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture and Society*, Berkeley, 1974, pp.17-42.

Rush, James R., "Opium in Java: A Sinister Friend," The Journal of Asian Studies, 54, (3), May 1985, pp.549-61.

Sangwan, Satpal, "From Gentlemen Amateurs to Professionals: Reassessing the Natural Science Tradition in Colonial India 1780-1840," in Richard H. Grove, Vinita Damodaran and Satpal Sangwan ed., *Nature and the Orient*, Delhi, 1998, pp.210-36.

Skaria, Ajay, "Shades of Wildness: Tribe, Caste and Gender in Western India", The Journal of Asian Studies, 56 (3), August 1997, pp.726-45.

Tharu, Susie, "Tracing Savitri's Pedigree: Victorian Racism and the Image of Women in Indo-Anglian Literature", in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, ed., *Recasting Women*, Delhi, 1989, pp.254-68.

Vicziany, Marika, "Imperialism, Botany, and Statistics in Early Nineteenth Century India: The Surveys of Francis Buchanan (1762-1829)", Modern Asian Studies, 20, (4), 1986, pp.625-60.

Washbrook, David, "Language, Culture and Society in India," in Penelope Corfield ed., *Language, History and Class*, Oxford, 1991, pp.179-203.

Winichakul, Thongchai, "Maps and the Formation of the Geo-Body of Siam," in Stein Tonnesson and Hans Antlov ed., *Asian Forms of the Nation*, Richmond, 1996, pp.67-92.

Unpublished Dissertations

Deshpande, Prachi, "Narratives of Pride: History and Regional Identity in Maharashtra, c.1870-1960," Unpublished Dissertation, Tufts, 2002.

Isaka, Riho, " The Gujarati Literati and the Construction of a Regional Identity in the Late Nineteenth Century," Cambridge, 1999.

Mohapatra, Pragati, "The Making of a Cultural Identity: Language, Literature and Gender in Orissa in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," London, 1997.

Naregal, Veena, "English in the Colonial University and the Politics of Language: the Emergence of a Public Sphere in Western India (1830-80)," London, 1998.

Orsini, Francesca, "The Hindi Public Sphere," London, 1997.

Roy, Sulagna, "Communal Conflict in Bengal, 1930-47," Cambridge, 1999.

Saikia, Sayeeda Yasmin, "A Name Without a People: Searching to be Tai-Ahom in Modern India," Wisconsin, 1999.

Sharma, Jayeeta, "Work, Temple and Identity: A Balmiki Colony in New Delhi," Delhi, 1994.

Travers, Robert, "Contested Notions of Sovereignty in Bengal under British Rule," Cambridge, 2000.

Zutshi, Chitralekha, "Community, State, and the Nation: Regional Patriotism and Religious Identities in the Kashmir Valley, c.1880 -1953," Unpublished Dissertation, Tufts, 2000.

Unpublished Secondary Works

Ahuja, Ravi, "'Captain Kittoe's Road': Early Colonialism and the Politics of Road Construction in Peripheral Orissa," Unpublished paper, August 2001.

Macfarlane, Alan and Iris, "Green Gold: The Empire of Tea," (Forthcoming London, 2003).

Sources in Assamese, Bengali and Sanskrit

Unpublished

"Buranji Vivekratna," attributed Maniram Barbhandar Barua, 1838. Transcript of Vol. 2, DHAS, Guwahati.

"Sahibor Gun Bornona," Anonymous Nineteenth-Century Mss, Asiatic Society, Calcutta.

Published

Bandhopadhyay, Brojendranath ed., *Sambadpatre Sekaler Kotha: 1830-40*, Vol. 2, Calcutta.

Bargeet, Jorhat, 1887.

Barthakur, Kumudeswar, *Jaymati Kahini*, Calcutta, 1918.

Barthakur, Kumudeswar, *Jhansir Rani*, Guwahati, 1964.

Barthakur, Kumudeswar, *Joan ob Arc*, Guwahati, undated.

Barua, Gunabhiram, *Anandaram Dhekial Phukanar Jivan Charitra*, Calcutta, 1880.

Barua, Gunabhiram, *Assam Buranji*, Calcutta, 1875 (reprint Guwahati, 1972).

Barua, Gunabhiram, *Ram-Navami Natak*, Calcutta, 18[illegible].

Barua, Harakanta, *Sadar Aminor Atmajivani*, Guwahati, 1930.

Barua, Hemchandra, *Kaniyar Kirtan*, Sibsagar, 1861.

Barua, Hemchandra, *Parhasalia Abhidan*, Guwahati,1892.

Barua, Nilkumud [Indibar], *Jivandarsha*, Calcutta, 1891.

Barua, P.C. *Assamese Proverbs*, Guwahati, 1963.

Bezbarua, Lakshminath, *Bezbaruar Granthavali*, 2 volumes, (reprint Guwahati, 1988).

Bezbarua, Lakshminath, *Jaymati Kunwari*, Calcutta, 1915.

Bezbarua, Lakshminath, *Mor Jivan Sowaran*, Guwahati, 1944.

Bhagavatratna, Jorhat, 1874.

Bhaktiratnasindhu, Guwahati, 1875.

Bhattacharya, Snehlata, *Aamar Bihu*, Calcutta, 1922.

Bhuyan, Jogendranath ed., *Ratneswar Mahanta Rasanavali*, Guwahati, 1994.

Bhuyan, Jogendranath, *Unnisso Satikar Asom-Sangbad*, Dibrugarh, 1998.

Bhuyan, S.K. ed., *Assamar Padya Buranji*, (Two chronicles by Dutiram Hazarika and Bisweswar Vaidyadhip), Guwahati, 1932 (reprint 1984).

Bhuyan, S.K. ed., Harakanta Barua's *Assam Buranji or A History of Assam From the Commencement of Assam in 1826 AD, being an Enlarged Version of the Chronicle of Kasinath Tamuli Phukan*, Guwahati, 1930.

Bhuyan, S.K., *Jaymati Upakhyan*, Guwahati, 1920.

Bordoloi, Rajani Kanta, *Miri Jiyari*, Calcutta, 1984.

Burman, Kasinath, *Nari-Ratna*, Calcutta, 1930.

Das, Beliram, *Namasudra Sampraday*, Calcutta, 1933.

Dhekial Phukan, Anandaram, *Ain O Byabastha Sangraha*, Calcutta, 1855.

Dhekial Phukan, Anandaram, *Phukan Dewan Quaidabandi*, Calcutta, 1849.

Dhekial Phukan, Anandaram, *Sadar Dewani Nishpatti*, Calcutta, 1850.

Dhekial Phukan, Haliram, *Assam Buranji orthat Assam Desher Itihas*, Calcutta, 1829 (reprint Guwahati, 1962).

Dhekial Phukan, Haliram, *Kamakhya-yatra-paddhati*, Calcutta, 1829.

Dutta Barua, Harinarayan, *Assam Buranji-path*, Guwahati, 1924.

Gohain Barua, Padmadhar, *Assam Buranji*, Tezpur, 1899 (reprints 1907 and 1916).

Gohain Barua, Padmanath, *Mor Sowarani*, Guwahati, 1968.

Gohain Baruah, Padmanath, *Jaymati Kunwari*, Calcutta, 1900.

Goswami, Hem Chandra ed., *Purani Assam Buranji*, Guwahati, 1922.

Goswami, Jatindranath, *Jaganath Baruar Jivani*, Jorhat, 1975.

Gunamala, Jorhat, 1872.

Gurdon, P.R.T. and Hem Chandra Goswami ed., *Hem Kosha by Hemchandra Barua*, Guwahati, 1900.

Hazarika, Atulchandra ed., *Asom Sahitya Sabhar Bhasanavali*, 2 volumes, Jorhat, 1955.

Itihas Mala, Jorhat, 1876.

Khakhlari, Jadunath, *Kacharir Kotha*, Jorhat, 1927.

Phrases, Assamese and Dhekeri, Sibsagar, 1849.

Rahman Barua, Abdur, *Islam*, North Lakhimpur, 1911.

Sarma Bejbarua, Tulsiram, *Hitopadesa*, 1884.

Sarma, Benudhar, *Congressor Kasiyali Rodot*, Guwahati, 1959.

Sarma, Benudhar, *Maniram Dewan*, Guwahati, 1950.

Sarma, Jogeswar ed., *Benudhar Sarmar Rasanavali,* Vol. 1: *Mojiyar Pora Mejoloi*, Guwahati, 1985.

Sarma, Jogeswar ed., *Benudhar Sarmar Rasanavali*: Vol. 2: *Buranjir Saphura*, Guwahati, 1985.

Sarma, Someswar, *Assam Companir Biboron*, Sibsagar, 1875.

Sarma, Tirthanath, *Auniati Satrar Buranji*, Majuli, 1975.

Shah, Muhammad, *Lukir Buranji*, Calcutta, 1922.

Talukdar, Nanda ed., *Lambodar Bora Rasanavali*, Guwahati, 1983.

Tamuli Phukan, Kasinath, *Assam Buranji-sar*, Sibsagar, 1844.

Contemporary Newspapers and Periodicals in Assamese

Abahon, Guwahati, 1929-39.

Assam Bandhu, Calcutta, 1885-6.

Assamiya, Dibrugarh, 1921-

Bahi, Calcutta and Guwahati, 1909-

Ghar Jeuti, Sibsagar, 1928-32.

Jonaki, Calcutta, 1883-89 and 1901-3.

Mau or The Bee, Calcutta, 1886-7.

Orunodoi, Sibsagar, 1846-80.

Sadhana, Guwahati, 1922-26.

Articles from Contemporary Periodicals in Assamese

A.B, "Aamar Manuh," Assam Bandhu, Vol. 4, 1885.

Barbarua, Hiteswar, "Kachari Bhatrisokol Aru Cachar Jila," Abahon, Vol. 4, 1930.

Bar Pujari, Shri Modram Sarma, "What are the advantages for Assamese people in reading the Orunodoi?" Orunodoi, October 1856.

Barua, Durganath, "Max Mueller," Jonaki, Vol. 1, Part 3, 1896.

Barua, Gunabhiram, "Agor Din, Etiyar Din (Pratham Adhyay)," Assam Bandhu, Vol. 1, 1885.

Barua, Jnanabhiram, "Agor Din," Abahon, Vol. 2, 1929.

Bezbarua, Lakshminath, "Kuli," Mau or The Bee, March 1887.

Bora, Bolinarayan, "Assamiya aru Bongali," Haranarayan Bora ed., Mau or The Bee, January 1887.

Bora, Bolinarayan, "Sah Bagisar Kuli," Haranarayan Bora ed., Mau or The Bee, February 1887.

Choudhury, Sonaram, "Asamot Aryar Bosoti," Jonaki, Vol. 5, Part 3, 1889.

Dhekial Phukan, Anandaram, "An Account of England," Orunodoi, April 1847.

"Fourth Letter from Calcutta," Orunodoi, October 1853.

"General Intelligence," Orunodoi, January 1846.

"General Intelligence," Orunodoi, March 1867.

"General Intelligence," Orunodoi, March 1868.

Goswami, Ramdas (Ratneswar Mahanta), "Jaymati Kunwari and Langi Gadapani," Jonaki, Vol. 3, Parts 11-12, 1886.

"Illegal Opium Cultivation," Orunodoi, February 1867.

"Joy of an Uncivilised People, the Bechuanas on Learning to Read," Orunodoi, May 1853.

"Learning Assamese - A Friendly Word," August 1853.

"Letter from Auniati Gosain," Orunodoi, April 1867.

"Letter from Calcutta," Orunodoi, May 1853.

Mahanta, Ratneswar, "Moamoria Bidroh," Jonaki, Vol. 3, Part 4, 1886.

R.M, "Bongal", Assam Bandhu, Vol. 3, 1885.

Sarma, Lakhidhar, "Sati Jaymati Kunwari," in Abahon, Vol. 3, 1935.

"Second Letter from Calcutta," Orunodoi, July 1853.

Shri J, "Prasin Bharatot Aryasabhyata," Jonaki, Vol. 5, Part 1, 1891.

Selections from Anthologies in Assamese

Bezbarua, Lakshminath, "Dangariya Dinanath Bezbaruar Sangsikpta Jivan Charit," in *Bezbarua Granthavali*, Vol.1, Guwahati, 1988, pp.

Bezbarua, Lakshminath, "Khohota Dimarur Satradhikar", in the collection *Borbaruar Buloni*, in *Bezbaruar Granthavali*, Vol. 2, Guwahati, 1988, pp.1323-7.

Bezbarua, Lakshminath, "Kripabor Baruar Kakotor Tupula," in *Bezbarua Granthavali*, Vol. 2, Guwahati, 1988, pp.1235-70.

Bezbarua, Lakshminath, "Nomal"; in *Bezbaruar Granthavali*, Vol. 2, Guwahati 1988, pp.1041-8.

Mahanta, Ratneswar, "Jaymati," in Jogendranath Bhuyan ed., *Ratneswar Mahanta Rasanavali*, Guwahati, 1994.

Film

Agarwala, Jyotiprasad, *Jaymati*, 1935.

Interviews

Hridayanand, Vivekanand members of the Agarwala family, Tezpur and Delhi, 2001.

Meenakshi Basu (Debjani Chaliha), Calcutta, 2001.

Reena Chaliha, Guwahati, 2001.

D

229713